The Crossroads Of Ravens

Andrzej Sapkowski

Table of Contents

CHAPTER ONE
CHAPTER TWO
CHAPTER THREE
CHAPTER FOUR
CHAPTER FIVE
CHAPTER SIX
CHAPTER SEVEN
CHAPTER EIGHT
CHAPTER NINE
CHAPTER TEN
CHAPTER ELEVEN
CHAPTER TWELVE
CHAPTER THIRTEEN
CHAPTER FOURTEEN
CHAPTER FIFTEEN
CHAPTER SIXTEEN
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN
CHAPTER NINETEEN
CHAPTER TWENTY
CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE
CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO
CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

THE CROSSROADS OF RAVENS
BY ANDRZEJ SAPKOWSKI

fan translation by Nikkur Hashem, not for commercial use

QUOTES

A ghastly wind howls in the gloomiest darkness,
A dreadful, bloodthirsty thing lurks in the shadows,
Evil gets closer; it's time to seek rescue,
Help, o witcher, arrive!
A scream of an innocent victim is heard in the distance,
The dark night and winter envelop the place,
The stones and white birches are splattered with blood,
But still there's no sign of the witcher.
Anonymous ballad, circa 1150 after the Resurrection.

Remember not the sins of my youth, nor my transgressions.
Psalm 25:7

Kaedwen is a land lying between the Dragon Mountains on the north, the Blue Mountains on the east, and primeval impenetrable forests on the west. The hereditary kings of the Topp dynasty reign there. The original capital was in ancient Ban Ard, but in 1130 after the Resurrection, King Dagread granted that city to a school for sorcerers and transferred the capital to Ard Carraigh, which lies in the middle of the land.
Other important Kaedweni cities are Ban Fearg, Daevon, Ban Fillim and Ban Gleann.
From time immemorial the coat of arms of the Topp dynasty and the entire land has been or, a unicorn sable forcené.
The royal lands of Kaedwen are surrounded with borderlands belonging to the common people, these borderlands are called marks or marches. They are administered by margraves, i.e. *counts, hereditary or appointed by the king. The name comes from the fact that the aforementioned lands are supposed to be a vanguard, and, ever expanding, they are to conquer new lands for Kaedwen from the elves, moving the borders further and setting their own signs, i.e., marks, further and further. These marches are: Western, Upper, Lakeland, and Lower.*
Baldwin Adovardo, the New Description of the Kaedwen Kingdom

CHAPTER ONE

Geralt sincerely wished to concentrate on the chattering of the alderman, but he couldn't. And he had a rather important reason for that: a large stuffed crow glaring at him with its glass eye from the alderman's table had taken up all his attention. The crow stood on a pedestal crafted from green-painted clay; both its legs were planted into it. That's why, despite its remarkably lifelike appearance, there was no doubt that the crow could not possibly be alive. Yet Geralt couldn't help but wonder: why had the crow, on multiple occasions, blinked at him with its glass eye? Could it be magic? Unlikely, for his witcher's medallion remained perfectly still, failing to twitch or vibrate even the slightest bit. A hallucination then? Or a vision, triggered by a couple of blows he had received to the head?

"I repeat my question", repeated his question alderman Bulava. "I repeat, though I'm not in the habit of repeating myself".

Alderman Bulava had assured Geralt several times that he wasn't in the habit of repeating himself. Nevertheless, he repeated the question over and over again. Apparently he liked it, though he wasn't in the habit of doing it.

"I repeat my question: what's the real story? What did you have against that deserter that you had to chop him up so badly? Some old grudge? Because, you see, I don't believe that it was all about that yokel and his daughter's honour. I don't believe that you rushed to their rescue like some shitty knight-errant."

The crow was glaring at Geralt. Geralt moved his hands tied behind his back, trying to stimulate the blood circulation. The rope was cutting painfully into his wrists. Behind him he could hear the heavy breathing of a village lout. The lout was standing right behind him, and Geralt was sure that he was just waiting for an excuse to punch him in the ear again.

Alderman Bulava wheezed, sprawled in his chair, sticking out his stomach under a velvet kaftan. Geralt stared at the front of the kaftan and realised what the alderman had eaten today, yesterday, and the day before yesterday; and that at least one of those dishes contained tomato sauce.

"I thought," the alderman said at last, "that I'd never have to see any of you witchers. No witcher has been seen in years. They said that after the year 1194 few of you survived up there, in the mountains. Then the news spread that the rest had already died from hunger or plague. And who'd have thought it, one of these chaps shows up in my village, and the first thing he commits is murder. And when caught red-handed, he has the gall to cite some fucking edict."

"In accordance with the imperial edict of the year 1150," gasped out Geralt, clearing his throat, "issued by Dagread, king of Kaedwen and the Borderland Marches, firstly: witchers are permitted to ply their trade freely on the territories of the Kingdom and the Marches and are exempt from the jurisdiction of local authorities…"

"Firstly," Bulava interrupted sharply, "half a century will soon pass since

Dagread turned to dust, and with him his imperial autocratic edicts. Secondly, no king will exempt anyone from me, because the king is in Ard Carraigh, far from here, and here the local authorities rule. That is, me. And thirdly, you, pal, were arrested not for plying your trade but for murder. Catching werewolves and killing leshies is your business, witcher. But no king has given you privileges for butchering humans."
"I stood up for…"
"Daryl!"
The lout obediently punched Geralt, this time on the back of the neck.
"Your repeat yourself," the alderman looked at the ceiling, "and it irritates me. Do you know what irritation can lead to? Even in such a calm man like me?"
The crow was glaring at Geralt with its glass eye. Geralt was silent.
"You," Bulava finally said, "are not a witcher. You are a defect. You have to be repaired. One has to return you to that mountainous abode of yours that people blather about. I don't know how you settle these things. It is possible that a mistake like you is to be dismantled into its component parts, to be used in the production of new, better witchers. Because, after all, that is how it is done there, isn't it? Witchers are put together from various human fragments, sewn together, glued together, or something like this. People say different things. Therefore, so as not to blather in vain… I will send you, a botch of a witcher, away back to the mountains, beyond the Gwenllech. In a week."
Geralt was silent.
"You won't even ask why in a week?" The alderman bared his yellow teeth.
"You like citing edicts and laws. I obey the law, too. And the law is that the newcomers are not allowed to carry weapons in the municipality. And you walked in here with a weapon.
Geralt wanted to protest that he hadn't walked in, but they had dragged him in. But he didn't have time.
"The punishment," declared Bulava, "is twenty strokes of the whip. The punishment will be carried out by Daryl, and he is a hard hitter. You won't be back on your feet for a week. Come on, boys, take him to the square and tie him to a pole…"
"Hey, cool your heels," a man in a dark grey robe, heavily soiled at the bottom, stopped the louts entering the hut.
"Bulava, why are you hurrying with that pole and whip? Do you want to cripple my witcher? Well, nothing of the kind. I need the witcher safe and sound at the construction site."
"And why are you," the alderman put his hands on his hips, "interfering with the execution, Blaufall? I still have to put up with you taking people from the village for labour service, but don't you interfere in my jurisdiction, it's none of your business, my jurisdiction. A crime must be punished…"
"He was a rogue," Blaufall interrupted. "There's no crime here, it was self-

defence and saving people. Don't grimace, don't grimace, because I have a witness here. Allow me, farmer. Now, don't be afraid. Tell us your story."
Geralt recognised the peasant. He was the same one he saved from robbery yesterday, who fled into the forest instead of thanking the witcher. Geralt remembered his daughter, stripped to her undergarment.
"I testify…" stuttered the peasant, pointing his finger at Geralt, "I testify that this here young lad came to my rescue from the brigands… He saved my goods… He saved my daughter from disgrace… He freed my innocent young'un from the clutches of the brigands…"
"And that deserter," suggested Blaufall, "lunged at him with an axe, the young man merely defended himself. Self-defence! Confirm it, farmer."
"Aye… Verily, yes! Mister Alderman, that young man is not to blame!"
The peasant was pale and unnaturally loud. "Mister Alderman! Set him free, I beseech you. And here… Please, take… By way of, hmm… Maybe there were some expenses or losses… I'd be happy to recompensate…"
Bowing obligingly, the peasant handed the alderman a purse. Bulava quickly put it in the pocket of his puffy trousers, so deftly that the purse didn't jingle.
"Self-defence!" he snorted. "He sliced a man into pieces with his sword. An innocent young man… I wish I could…"
They went out to the square. The louts pushed Geralt out without untying his hands.
"And you, Blaufall," the alderman asked, "are you so desperate that you even dragged a witness here? Do you need this witcher that much?"
"As if you don't know? We are constructing a road, the Great Road, from Ard Carraigh through the forests up to Hengfors itself. It's a big deal, not just some clearing, but a dry and level roadway paved with logs and fascines, so that carts and horse-drawn vehicles could drive along the road. The Great Road is really important, it is an extensive trade route for our, that is, Northern countries. The king himself had ordered us to hurry up. But there are monsters in the forest and in the swamps, every now and then some worker disappears, killed or whisked off by a monster…"
"And since when do you care about workers? You always said that a worker is unimportant: one is gone, there are plenty of others…"
"Screw the workers, most of them are provided for labour service. But sometimes a monster wipes a foreman out, and this disorganises my operation and makes the work front go up in flames. Well, what's there to say. I tell you, I need a witcher, if I miss the deadline, not only will I get no damn bonus, but they could even send an inspection. And an inspection…"
"They'll always find something," Bulava nodded understandingly. "Either construction materials were sold on the side, or the cost estimates were inflated, or…"
"Don't stray from the subject," Blaufall grimaced. "And release the witcher right now, without delay, I'll take him with me to the construction site immediately… What the hell… What's going on?"

“The guardsmen from the outpost.” The alderman shielded his eyes with his hand. “Mr. Carleton’s soldiers.”
A dozen or so horsemen rode into the square at a gallop, raising dust and scaring the chickens. They were armed, dressed garishly, brightly, but rather like vagabonds. Only the two at the front looked rather elegant: the commander, a man with a moustache wearing an elkskin jacket, a gilded baldric, and a hat with a bundle of ostrich feathers; the other one was a long-haired elf in a green scout uniform with a headband on his forehead.
“Mister Captain Reisz Carleton,” Bulava greeted, going out to meet him. “Welcome, welcome. To what do I owe this honour?”
Mister Captain Reisz Carleton leant forward in his saddle and spat heartily. Then he gave a sign to the scout. The elf rode up to the pole with a crossbar and deftly threw the rope with a loop at the end over the beam.
“Whoa.” Bulava put his hands on his hips and looked around to see if the louts were standing behind him. “It seems that Mister Captain has come to my village for hanging. Oh, I can even see whose lot it is to hang today. I see, I see, those two in shackles… Ha, it means that the captain caught the deserters from his outpost! Those two who attacked my peasants and wenches in the woods?”
“I don’t intend to hang those two,” Captain Reisz Carleton twirled his moustache. “They’ll both run a gauntlet to remember. And that’s it. I don’t have enough men to hang them for anything. And I can’t let some vagabond murder them with impunity.”
The captain straightened up in the saddle, raised his voice, addressing not only the alderman, but also the village louts, Blaufall, his lackeys and the crowd of peasants who were already gathering.
“What am I supposed to punish my soldiers for? What for? For their absence without leave? Because they wanted to screw a girl? After all, our outpost is like the end of the world, it’s like an exile, like a punishment. No beer, no wenches… It’s no wonder that the lads are sometimes up to some job on the side, they want to grab some…”
“And why the hell,” Reisz Carleton raised his voice, “are wenches roaming in the woods? And this here farmer, did he have to go there with his young lady, couldn’t he just leave her at home? It is no surprise that the lads wanted to… I don’t approve of it! I don’t approve of it at all, but I understand! Mr. Aelvarr? Are you ready there?”
“Ready, captain.”
“Then bring this witcher here, Bulava. He killed my soldier, so he’ll be hanged. We need an exemplary execution. And don’t take him down, alderman, let him hang as a warning to others.”
Blaufall stepped forward, made as if he wanted to speak, but then stopped. The henchmen were holding Geralt, but they stood there looking confused. As it turned out, it was the right decision.
Everything around was suddenly strangely quiet. It seemed as if something

cold blew.
A pitch-black horse slowly entered the square from behind the barns. A white-haired man in a black leather jacket with silver studs on the shoulders sat on the horse. The hilts of two swords stuck out over the rider's right shoulder.
Slowly, even gracefully, the black horse passed the villagers and the alderman and stopped before Captain Carleton's cavalry.
There was silence for a moment. Then the black horse tossed its head. The bit rings jingled.
"Mister Alderman Bulava," the white-haired rider spoke out in the ruling silence, "will free the young witcher immediately. He will return his horse, weapons, and belongings. Immediately."
"Yes…" the alderman coughed. "Yes, Mr. Holt. One minute…"
"Mister Captain Carleton." The rider bowed slightly. "I salute you."
"Mister Witcher Preston Holt." Reisz Carleton touched the brim of his hat. "I salute you."
"Mister Captain," the rider raised his voice, "will you kindly take this elf, his rope, and the rest of your subordinates away from here? You are no longer needed. Today's lynching is called off."
"Really?" The captain straightened in the saddle, resting his hand on the crossguard of his sword. "Are you so sure, Mister Witcher?"
"Yes, I'm sure. I bid farewell. Mister Alderman, is the youth free? Are his belongings returned?"
"Oh, you son of a bitch!" yelled one of Carleton's horsemen, yanking his sword from its scabbard and rearing his horse. "You'll be…"
He didn't finish. The rider named Preston Holt raised his hand and made a brief gesture. Something howled and whistled in the air, the villagers covered their ears. The horseman screamed, flew out of the saddle like from a sling, and fell hard and helplessly right under the hooves of his companions, their horses shied, snorted, stamped, and shook their heads, one horse reared up. The horse of the fallen man bolted towards the huts, kicking and flinging out. It became very quiet.
"Anyone else?" Preston Holt raised his gloved hand. "Anyone willing to pick up a fight? Play the hero? No? That's what I thought. I bid you farewell, gentlemen soldiers. Is the young witcher already in the saddle?"
"Yes, I am", replied Geralt.
"Let's go then. Follow me."

The Upper March has its boundary marker set on the Gwenllech River. It is known that the ambition of the local margraves is to make incursions further into the valleys of the Dragon Mountains, therefore they got accustomed to call their domain Cismontane, as if it would soon be enlarged by the Tramontane part, when the elves would be driven further into the mountains. Nevertheless, years had passed, and nothing of the sort happened.

CHAPTER TWO

The Kingdom of Kaedwen was known throughout the inhabited world for its cold and unpredictable weather. Closed off from the north by the barrier of the Dragon Mountains, and from the east by the huge range of the Blue Mountains, the land suffered from unpredictable and frequent invasions of air masses, resulting in long and frosty winters, cold springs and short, rainy summers. As for autumn, it was difficult to predict — sometimes it was sunny, warm and pleasant, and sometimes not at all.

Now, in the month of March, called Birke by the elves, snow still lay here and there in ravines and hollows, white patches blanketed glades and sinkholes. Yellowish sheets of ice still covered some puddles and ditches. The sun felt warm, but when the blistering cold wind from the mountains blew, it burned as if it were still January.

Geralt left Kaer Morhen the day before the Equinox, that was the custom of witchers. Practice had shown that monsters were most hungry and so aggressive after the winter that people in villages and settlements were willing to spend money to hire a witcher, even though they had eaten up their supplies in the early spring and were practically destitute. But Geralt hadn't had a chance to be hired. As it happened, after barely two days' ride away from the mountains, here you are — a peasant and his daughter, marauders, a bald lout with bad teeth, wham, bam, and this is it. He had been brought to justice by the alderman Bulava from the settlement of Neuhold, then he was threatened to be lynched by the soldiers from the nearby outpost, then he was saved by that strange white-haired man riding on a black horse, with two swords on his back, and Geralt was following him now.

"I suggest," the strange person turned in the saddle, "that we ride together for a while. Captain Carleton may still want to hang you, it was obvious he really wanted to. He's not stupid enough to come after me, but you, alone, might be an easy target. So if you don't mind my company…"

"Oh yeah," Geralt agreed hastily, urging on his dun mare. "With pleasure… I… I am…"

"I know who you are. Did your hair turn white after the mutations? After the Changes? Loss of pigment, like mine?"

"But … how…"

"How do I know who you are? Because I've been following what was going on in your Stronghold. And I've heard that a certain child prodigy had been trained there, his name is Geralt and he's going to hit the trail soon."

"But Vesemir…"

"Did he ever mention me? So, my name, Preston Holt, never came up? I'll explain: Vesemir and I have been moving in different orbits for some time, as it were. If you know what I mean."

Geralt didn't really know what an orbit was, but he nodded understandingly. They rode in silence for a while, side by side.

“So you set off from Kaer Morhen on the trail,” Preston Holt finally said. “Not the best start, but that’s how it goes with starts. I don’t mean to blame you, on the contrary, I saw the corpse of that marauder and your blows must be acknowledged as impeccable. Perhaps unnecessary, perhaps rash, perhaps clumsy — but all in all, they were impeccable.”

They fell silent again, observing a herd of cattle driven out onto the pasture and a shepherd, running from cow to cow to warm up his frozen feet in the fresh, warm cow pats. The pats probably didn’t warm him up much, but the running helped a lot.

“They’re driving the cows out,” Holt noted, “even though the grass is barely visible. This is a sign that the season has started and you will find work easily, Geralt. The villagers will soon be willing to pay for the protection of shepherds and their livestock. Let’s guide out horses over there, to the birch grove along the edge of the drainage adit.”

“The edge of what?”

“The drainage adit. This ditch over there is a drainage adit, a canal by means of which water was once drained from the mine. As you surely know, we are in the part of the kingdom of Kaedwen called the Upper March. The wealth of the Upper March is minerals: mainly salt, but also silver, nickel, zinc, lead, lapis lazuli and other such. At least that’s how it used to be, now most of the minerals seem to be running out. Nothing lasts forever.”

Geralt didn’t comment.

“Do you see that hill in front of us? It’s called Day-Peep, that’s how it is listed on official maps. About a century ago, a peasant actually named Day-Peep had accidentally dug up a lump of silver there, the size of a large cabbage. A mine was immediately established here, it cut its way into the mountainside. Large amounts of silver, galena and lead ore were mined here. But the deeper the miners dug, the greater were their troubles with water. There are a lot more of such drainage adits like this one here, you’ll see them. Finally, the cost of drainage made the whole mining process unprofitable. The miners had moved to other areas. They left a labyrinth of narrow passages and pits, partially flooded. And now for the best part: the abandoned and flooded mine was occupied by wandering gobblers. Do you know what gobblers are, I gather?”

“Gobblers”, Geralt recited, taking a breath, “are small creatures bearing a resemblance to dog-headed monkeys. They are gregarious, live underground, in the dark. A pack of gobblers is dangerous…”

“They are dangerous as hell,” Preston Holt cut off the recitation. “And quite often they pester amateur miners who come to dig into the slopes of Day-Peep in search of silver, which can still be dug up here. Oh, and here is an illustration of my speech: the canvasses of carts and tents shining over there. Let’s go straight to the camp of the first brave diggers of this spring.”

A delegation of the brave diggers armed with shovels and clubs came out to greet them. The menacing faces of the greeters conveyed a simple message:

begone, newcomers, we were here first. Soon, however, their faces cleared up — the newcomers were not, as a closer inspection revealed, undesirable competitors. And now, the faces that had not so long ago been reluctant, shone with sheer joy.
“Oh, ye gods!”, cried out the chief digger, hiding the hoe behind his back, which he had been swinging menacingly just a moment before. “Thank the gods! Oh, it is the honorable mister witcher! When we heard that you were in the area, we were just about to send someone to fetch you! And lo and behold, you have come to us yourself, ‘tis like a gift from the heaven!”
“That is my habit.” Preston Holt straightened up in the saddle. “Falling from heaven to those in need. Since I am a witcher.”
In the meantime, several lamenting women joined the diggers. Their pleas were getting louder and incoherent. Preston Holt demanded order with his voice and a gesture. It took some time to finally figure out what the diggers and their women were talking about and what they really wanted.
“We need a witcher, a witcher!” the main digger shouted, waving his hoe. “Those underground beasts that live under the mountain snatched one of our boys! They attacked, grabbed him and dragged him down there! Who will save him now, if not you?”
“Less than two weeks ago,” uttered Holt, “I warned you to stay away from the shaft and the adit. Didn’t I? Didn’t I tell you to dig on the other side of the mountain? You say, the gobblers snatched your boy? How many years ago? Five? A long time ago? Oh, the day before yesterday? You weren’t in a hurry to send for me. Dismount, Geralt.”
Preston Holt dismounted. Geralt couldn’t help but notice that he had a hard time dismounting. And that he was limping badly on his left leg. With a gesture, he drove away the wailing women who had surrounded him. He talked with the chief digger for a moment, then pulled at Geralt’s sleeve.
“Well, mister young witcher,” he said. “Come and help the people in trouble, who are suffering from monsters. For that is what we were hired for.”
“If the gobblers kidnapped the boy the day before yesterday,” Geralt muttered, “then there’s little chance he’s still…”
“Alive? Yes, that’s unlikely. But maybe we’ll at least find… Hmm… We’ll give his mother the opportunity to bury his remains… Why are you hesitating, young Geralt? You have just rushed, without thinking, to defend a maiden’s honour and slash a man to death, and now you are hesitating?”
“Did I say something?” Geralt shrugged. “Or am I hesitating? I am not hesitating.”

****

On the slope of the mountain lay the remnants of wooden structures, probably of a drainage mill. There was a gaping shaft there, partially collapsed, revealing the abyss.
“All that’s left of the mine is a shaft,” Holt explained, “and an adit, over there.

Both lead to a higher pit. The pit is winding, because it runs along a completely worked-out vein. From there, a slope runs downwards, leading to a lower pit, even more winding, with numerous branches. And below that there's another adit, but it's completely flooded. The gobblers swarm in the lower adit. There may also be some cavities and connections with natural caves there."
"So, here's the plan: my leg won't let me go down there, so I'll descend under the adit, make some noise there and attract the gobblers to me. Then it's all up to you. You'll go down the shaft to the adit, from there you go down the slope. There you may have a chance to find… What needs to be found. With a bit of luck. Which I wish you, boy. See you up there."
"Maybe first," Geralt ventured, "I should have a gander…"
"Have what?" Holt grimaced. "Oh, I see. But there's no point in… having any ganders. Drink an elixir, grab the medallion and go down the shaft."
"With all due respect, sir," the chief digger standing next to him mumbled, "but that young valiant lad o'er here… Can he do it? We thought you, Mr. Holt, would go down. Yourself…"
Preston Holt turned and looked at him. The digger cringed, mumbled something and fell silent.

****

The adit was high, Geralt could go at full height straight and the vault was still a couple of feet higher. Water dripped from the walls everywhere, the only sound was the sound of drops falling. He quickened his pace, he wanted to reach the downward slope as quickly as possible, before Holt, as he promised, made a commotion at the adit.
Deep cavities were seen along the walls of the pit, traces of dug out bunches of ore. In one of these cavities he spotted a strange brick construction, or rather the remains of one. He had no idea that these were the remains of an ancient shrine.
Miners, which Geralt also did not know, believed in gods the longest of all social groups. Working in conditions of constant danger, they had to believe that some deity was watching over them and that praying to it would ensure their safety. It is easy to guess that practice soon proved that prayers had been fruitless, that collapses and methane explosions befell the pious as often as the nonbelievers. But the miners believed nevertheless, built shrines, lit candles and prayed. For a long time, but not forever. Reason, as usual, finally won.
The passage began to descend suddenly, Geralt was approaching the adit. He listened, but still heard nothing but dripping water.
He seemed to be already right at the lower adit when it started.
A large stone whistled out of the darkness, grazing his hair. More stones followed, some hitting the target. One hit Geralt in the head and staggered him, and the gobblers rushed at him from all sides, howling and barking

wildly, scratching and biting him. There was no way to count how many there were of them, they were bustling around too fast. Geralt yanked his sword out from its scabbard, only to lose it immediately — two of the creatures immobilized him, the third one knocked his weapon out of his hands with a large stone. The creature raised the captured sword and roared triumphantly, opening its canine maw as wide as possible. The triumph was premature — Geralt threw both his assailants off of him, grabbed a stone and threw it, hitting the gobbler right in its teeth. The gobbler dropped the sword, Geralt jumped, caught the weapon before it fell, and hacked the creature fumbling with the stone that got stuck in its maw. With two quick cuts he sliced the other two gobblers and scurried towards the shaft. Behind him Geralt heard a wild barking and stones flew again, some of them hit him. One hit him in the back of the head — there was a flash, and a firework of stars lit up the pit. The second stone hit him in the small of his back and almost knocked him over. The gobblers got to him twice, sinking their teeth into his calves; his leather riding boots saved him from serious injury. One of them jumped and bit him painfully above the knee, where the boots did not protect him. Geralt killed it without hesitation.

Under a hail of stones, he ran to the shaft, climbed up the remains of a ladder, emerged on the surface, fell and lay there for some time.

"Well, well," he heard. "You managed to get out. And even without major injuries. I see, blood is leaking from a few places. But there are no perforating wounds, and that's all right. I'm full of admiration."

Preston Holt stood over him, finishing off a roast chicken leg.

"C'mon," Geralt groaned, still lying down. "C'mon! You were supposed to be in the adit… To make some noise… To distract…"

"Really?" Holt threw out the bone. "Oh, yes. Pardon me, I completely forgot."

Geralt swore with his lips still on the ground.

"I'll tell you more." Holt licked his fingers. "They won't pay us anything. Because the boy was found. He came himself, he was just wandering around somewhere, and the diggers, as usual, blamed the gobblers. Get up, young Geralt. Witcher Geralt. Let me help. Can you walk? Then let's go. Like I said, there will be no payment. But they'll feed us and give us a place to sleep over. The girls will dress your cuts. If you ask nicely, maybe one of them will be nice to you."

They went towards the campsite and the steaming pots. Witcher Geralt could hardly walk.

The chubby girls bandaged him in a few places and fed him. And the diggers let them stay for the night. Holt slept in a tent, Geralt slept in a cart.

One of the girls came to Geralt at night and was nice. But only nice, just a little bit and nothing more. And right after that she was gone.

****

At dawn Geralt scrambled out of the cart and began to saddle his mare, still

hissing in pain. Holt caught him off guard in the act.
“What’s the rush?” He rubbed his eye. “Wait. They’ll treat us to breakfast, then we’ll move on.”
“C’mon,” Geralt answered through his teeth. “What if I’m not sure at all whether I want to go anywhere with you? Maybe I’d rather go alone?”
Holt leant against the trunk of a birch tree and looked at the sky. Sunny, without a single cloud.
“I fully understand,” he said, “your attitude. But I had to — I stress this point — test you first, see what you’re like in action.”
“I could have never gotten out of there.”
“But you did.”
“Not thanks to your help. That’s why now…”
“I’m asking you,” Holt cut him short, “to accompany me on horseback until noon. That is, taking into account the time of day, about five or six leagues. This time and distance will be enough, I think, for you to vent your anger at me and take a sober look at the world. And then I will have an offer for you.”
“What kind of offer?” Geralt squinted his eyes.
“Six leagues. At noon.”

****

It was indeed almost noon when the sky suddenly turned dark with wings, the flapping of feathers and incessant loud croaking filled the air. Dozens, if not hundreds of black birds rose from the ground and from the branches of the surrounding trees and flew away.
“Ravens,” Geralt gasped. “So many ravens! It can’t be! Ravens don’t fly in swarms! Never!”
“You are right,” admitted Holt. “So many ravens at once is an unusual thing, I’m surprised myself. We are undoubtedly dealing with an unusual phenomenon. And we are also in a rather unusual place, if you have noticed.”
“A crossroads.” Geralt looked around. “A junction of roads.”
“A crossroads, a symbolic place. Four roads leading to the four corners of the world. A place of choice and decision. Which you will have to make now, Geralt. Witcher Geralt.”
The ravens occupied the higher branches of the trees. The ravens were croaking, examining the riders thoroughly.
“Three of the roads, including ours, are your roads as a lonely witcher, the fate you chose when you set out on the trail from Kaer Morhen. If you take any of these three roads, if that is your decision, we will part ways. However, if you choose the fourth road, you will listen to my offer.”
The ravens were croaking.

****

“I am, as you have probably noticed, getting on in years. I might add, quite a

lot of years. You would be surprised how old I am. I am also, and it is obvious and impossible to hide, a cripple.
My days of witcher glory are a matter of the past. I will no longer set out on the trail with swords, the light of my blades, so to speak, will no longer dispel the darkness. But the darkness exists, the monsters still besiege the night. You can face them and defeat them. People threatened by monsters are waiting for your help."
"That's right, I am waxing poetic here, and you are waiting for my offer. Here it is: I propose cooperation. I have been and still am known here, in Kaedwen, I have never complained about lack of clients, and even now people ask me for help, which I can no longer give them. But you can. I have taken a closer look at you and I say: be my successor, Geralt. Instead of wandering hungry along the roads, come and live with me. You can benefit from my reputation and you will have no shortage of work. And when the work is done, you will have a place to return to, and a place to spend the winter. As for me… I will be happy that someone is continuing my work. And also, I do not hide the fact that someone will help me support myself in my old age."
"You don't have to decide right away. For now, it will be enough if you continue not alone, but with me. Accompany me for a while. Agreed?"
"Well, how should I know… Agreed."
"Let's go then. Let's leave this crossroads to the ravens."
The ravens bid them farewell with a croak.
"Don't be offended," Holt turned around in the saddle, "but I insist that you express yourself more or less correctly around me. In particular, don't use phrases like 'have a gander' or 'c'mon'."

The Western March lies on the Buina River, whereas in the west it rests on the Kestrel Mountains. It was the margraves' earlier intention to move the border further and further west, albeit their efforts came to nought, because the kingdom of Hengfors had demarcated its eastern border there. There was a dispute thereabout but it ended with no blood shed. Hengfors, albeit being small, had a powerful protector in Kovir, so the margraves had to grow humbler and agree to peace. The peace, concluded in 1225 after the Resurection and called the Barefield Treaty, established the borders between the two kingdoms on the Braa river and thus set the western border of the March as a non plus ultra.
Baldwin Adovardo, the New Description of the Kaedwen Kingdom

CHAPTER THREE

As usual, the first to notice them were the cats and children. A multitude of cats on the edge of the town reluctantly moved out of the way, turning their heads and hissing. The children fled home crying and howling, abandoning whatever they had been playing with, mainly lumps of dried mud.

Apart from the cats and children, none of the residents of the town of Spynham paid the slightest attention to the arrival of the witchers. It seemed that riders in black cloaks with swords on their backs visited Spynham so regularly that they didn't interest the local population anymore.

Preston Holt knew the little town, knew the location of a stable to leave their mounts. They proceeded on foot, down a muddy street, scaring more cats and more brats on their way.

"Lord," a beggar woman hunkering by the wall with a baby in her lap accosted Geralt. "Lord, give me a coin… The child needs milk…"

Before Holt could intervene, Geralt took a mark out of his purse and threw it to the old woman. She thanked him effusively. Holt was silent for about half a hundred steps, then finally stopped.

"You are not a lord," he uttered between his teeth, looking Geralt straight in the eyes. "You are a dimwit. A mark could buy the milk yield of twelve cows. As you will soon find out, they will want to pay you only a little more for killing a monster. And killing a monster is a bit more effort than begging for alms and displaying your rotten teeth. And the child was probably borrowed from her gal pal who sits in a tavern, waiting for a customer she could suck off in the privy for half a mark. I warn you, do not go down this street again, next time you appear here, you'll be laughed at."

For a moment, Geralt wanted to stand up to Holt and snap at him, tell him to leave him alone and mind his own business. But he didn't. Somehow he instinctively recognised Holt as his senior, almost his master. Maybe because Holt had an incredible resemblance to Vesemir, in his behaviour and speech only, because he was very different physically.

Before them, the temple's whitewashed colonnades shone, and an entire army of beggars of both sexes crouched under the colonnades. The temple had been closed and abandoned for years, but the beggars were still crouching there, stretching out their hands for alms. Out of habit.

Holt prudently pulled Geralt to the opposite side of the street.

"Do you know why we are called witchers?" Holt asked him. "Because we are children of witches."

"C'mon…" Geralt stammered. "I mean, I've also figured it out. Witchers from witches. Leave me alone."

"You might find it funny, but this is precisely the truth. The first witchers were children of women with uncontrolled magical abilities, who were called witches. They were not in their right minds and often served as sexual toys for lewd young men. Children, the result of such games, were left or abandoned at somebody's door. And sometimes from orphanages and

shelters they got to witcher schools."
"Oh yeah, sure. You made that up. It wasn't like that."
"Yes, it was. All of us witchers descend from mentally retarded girls. Isn't it funny?"
"Not at all. Because none of that happened."
"I tell you, it was so but a long time ago! You won't find any witches near the temples now. Sorcerers exterminated them all. Ha! Nothing lasts forever."
The closer to the marketplace, the more people there became. For Geralt, this was something new. He wasn't used to crowds, he felt uncomfortable. The noise annoyed him. He was struggling for breath, and the stench was getting more and more bothersome. It stank of smoke, burnt fat, rotting fruit, manure, and hell knows what else.
At the marketplace they had to enter a row of stalls among a crowd of buyers. Here once again new emotions and surprises awaited Geralt. And finally, admiration. He had never imagined that there were so many crafts in the world and such an abundance of products offered for sale. And that there were so many people willing to buy. Straps and other leather products, glazed and unglazed clay pots, fur caps, sheepskin coats, mountaineer moccasins, scarves with embroidery, copper frying pans, rakes, pitchforks, hoe handles, and bubliks, bubliks, and bubliks again.
Holt didn't pay the slightest attention to the wonders on the stalls. At some point, however, he stopped pushing his way through and grabbed Geralt by the sleeve.
"Eyes down," he hissed. "Eyes down, don't stare."
"What's wrong?"
"Sorceresses."
Geralt obediently looked away. Reluctantly. The two women at a stall with amber jewelry attracted his eye like magnets. They wore rich clothes and were pretty as a picture.
"Sorceresses," Holt explained, when they had already gone away, "consider ordinary people to be cattle and they hate witchers. They are quick-tempered, and staring may be regarded as a hostile act. It would also be better if they did not sense our medallions."
Holt stopped in front of a luxurious house with a sign nailed above the door. The painting on the sign, quite good, depicted a mermaid with ample breasts. The inscription under the mermaid read: "Lorelei."
Holt grabbed the knocker and knocked hard. Very hard.
The massive door opened and a broad-shouldered large man with a jaw like a big loaf of bread stood in the doorway. The man eyed the witchers for a long moment, then he stepped back, inviting them to come in.
It seemed that Holt wasn't new here, he pulled both swords off his back without being asked and handed them over to the henchman. Geralt quickly followed his example.
Disarmed, they entered an antechamber, lit by several lamps. Geralt couldn't

breathe, the air in the antechamber was saturated with the scent of perfumes and incense. Another painting of a mermaid hung on the wall. She had big boobs too. There was no inscription.
“Mr. Preston Holt,” a woman said, entering the room.
“Mrs. Pampinea Monteforte.” Holt bowed. Geralt bowed too. And closed his mouth, which he had opened a moment ago in admiration.
Unfamiliar with the art of women’s tailoring, Geralt could not have known that Pampinea Monteforte’s black dress had been made of transparent chiffon, muslin and crepe. He also did not know that it is a great art to sew a dress so that it covers while revealing, and vice versa. Geralt also did not know that it is the quintessence of femininity.
But though he didn’t know it, he could see it.
“A young man?” Pampinea Monteforte smiled charmingly, shaking her storm of auburn hair.
“His name is Geralt. A young adept in the witcher’s art.”
“I hope,” Pampinea’s voice changed strangely, “that the adept was not brought… to celebrate, shall we say, a rite of passage? I have to remind Mr. Holt that nothing has changed at the “Lorelei.” At the “Lorelei” neither Mr. Holt, who is otherwise very welcome, nor another witcher, can be served. Because…”
“Because,” Holt interrupted gently, “other customers might not want a girl who had been previously touched by a witcher. Yes, I remember that, dear Pampinea, and it never occurred to me to break the local rules. By no means I’ve come here as a client, my only intention is to meet my acquaintance and a business contact, Timur Voronoff. He let me know he would be here and arranged a meeting. So is he here today?”
“At the “Lorelei””, Pampinea pouted her full lips, “we do not usually give out information about our clients. Regardless of whether they have made an appointment or not. However, due to the special bond between you and Mr. Voronoff that I know about… I can inform you that you obviously missed one another. Mr. Voronoff had been here a week ago. He spent a few days, probably waiting for the arranged meeting. When he failed to meet you, he left Spynham. Now he is probably at home, in Belvoir.”
“Thanks a million.” Holt bowed again and gestured for Geralt to bow. “Our humblest respects…”
“Mr. Holt,” Pampinea Monteforte lowered her voice, “To the best of my knowledge, you are aware of the secret entrance to the “Lorelei” at the back of this building. The entrance is for special and secret guests… So if both witcher gentlemen were to express a desire for a meal… And some special services…”
“I wish we could,” Holt replied, to Geralt’s great regret. “But time is short and duty calls. Maybe another time.”

****

When they left, Geralt was getting ready to reproach Holt. He didn't have time.

Voices reached them from the direction of a nearby well. A high-pitched squeal of a woman and a man's drunken baritone. Geralt immediately rushed in that direction. Before Holt could grab him by the sleeve, he saw the scene: a big man with a paunch sneaking out over his belt was beating with a stick a woman cowering at his feet. The woman was squealing, and the man was beating.

Geralt was already going to step in, but Holt was faster, despite his crippled leg. He jumped in, grabbed the man by the arm, and tugged him away.

"What's your problem, you vagabond?" the guy roared. "I'll show ya…"

He raised his stick and aimed to strike Holt. And then something happened that completely escaped the eyes of both Geralt and the crowd that was already gathering. Despite his lame leg, Holt rolled into a lightning-fast half-turn, rushing into close combat, and the lout flew off as if from a slingshot, hit his head on the base of the well and stretched out on the cobblestones.

"Hey there!" Holt shouted. "A man down! Something has happened to him! Help him, good people!"

The good people stood, stared and were not in a hurry to help. And both witchers left quickly.

Noone tried to stop them.

My Guide! My Lord! My Master! Now lead on:
One will shall serve the two of us in this.
Dante Alighieri, The Divine Comedy, translated by John Ciardi

CHAPTER FOUR

"What's wrong, young Geralt, why are you so down in the mouth? And why are you sulking? Look around. Spring is reigning all around, the willows are covered with catkins, the birds are singing, the brook is babbling softly. The smells of farming are coming from the village. That is, sour milk and shit. And you, instead of rejoicing together with nature, are in low spirits. Why is that?"

"My stomach is growling. We could have stayed there, in Spynham, get a bite to eat… That lady invited us…"

Preston Holt snorted.

"I suspect that you are upset not about skipping the dinner, but some fooling around with a young girl from the "Lorelei". The time will come for that, I promise, more than once or twice Pampinea Monteforte will host us in their secret annexe. And we'll find some brave girls among her young ladies. Now I would like to get to my house, Rocamora, as soon as possible."

"What does the name mean? Rocamora?"

"I have no idea. I bought the property with the name."

****

Preston Holt, as he explained to Geralt, wandered from the capital itself along the Great Road, which would connect Kaedwen with Hengfors, and further with Kovir and Poviss. The deforestation woke up monsters, and the crowds of people also attracted them. The overseers were ready to pay for protection, there was a lot of work and lucrative contracts for a witcher. Four odd years ago, before the construction of the road reached the borders of the Upper March, there was an accident. During a fight with a meganeura, which he defeated and killed, Holt was seriously injured, he also suffered a complicated leg fracture. The accident severely damaged Holt's witcher career. Then he bought the Rocamora farm and retired.

"From time to time I accept contracts," Holt confessed to Geralt. "Voronoff chooses easier monsters for me, and I hit the trail again. This time I went north specifically to meet you. I was there in February, I met a lot of people: the supervisors of the Great Road, the aldermen, the soldiers. You've got to admit, these acquaintances paid off."

"Who is this Voronoff? You asked that lady about him…"

"Pampinea Monteforte, the whoremistress. And a lady, of course, a true lady. As for Timur Voronoff, he is my agent."

"This Mrs. Pampinea said that you missed one another. That he returned to… To Belvoir? But we are not going there?"

"No, it is out of our way. We are going south, along the royal road. Belvoir is to the west."

"And this agent… What does he actually do?"

"You will find out in due time, when you finally make a decision about my

offer. So, have you made up your mind yet? Can we talk about it?"
"Maybe later."
"As you wish. Hurry up your horse."

****

Thatched roofs glowed in a picturesque little valley among hornbeams, alders and willows. Smoke drifted lazily from a chimney. Holt stood up in his stirrups.
"We're home."
"That is," Geralt muttered, "you are home."
"And you are too. Provided that you agree to my offer."
"Provided that I agree."
"You're a tough one. Well, let's go in."
Rocamora, surrounded by a palisade, could be reached through a driveway gate leading to the courtyard. There was a house there, a solid building made of pine logs, under a steep thatched roof. There were a lumber room, a stable, a barn, a well, a pigeonhouse, a bathhouse and several sheds next to the house.
A large hallway led through the servants' room to a spacious chamber with a tiled stove; several bowers were adjacent to the chamber. A large kitchen and staff rooms were attached to the house.
The staff consisted of a land steward, a gloomy fellow constantly occupied with accounts, a senior servant with the character of a squire, a stable lad and constantly changing hired girls from the village. There was also a fat, noisy and moody woman who combined the functions of cook and housekeeper. It was easy to forgive the old woman for her screams and moods, because she was a skilful cook. Geralt was accustomed to the monotonous and actually poor diet in Kaer Morhen, and meals in Rocamora always seemed to him no less than royal feasts. Never in his entire life had he seen or tasted dishes such as beef or cabbage rolls, while lamb with vegetables was an unimaginable feast.
The feasts, idleness and watching carrier pigeons fly in and out did not last long.
"I think that you are aware of the fact," Holt began, leading Geralt to the barn, "that you almost miraculously avoided the noose in the case with that deserter. You killed a man with a sword, and noone cares whether you tried to defend yourself or another innocent victim. People don't like witchers. They can hang you for killing a man, as a result of a court ruling or a lynching. That's why it's better not to draw a sword on people. There are other ways to deal with them."
"Signs?"
"Not only that."
In a completely empty barn four posts were dug into the clay, with imitations of human heads and torsos made of hard leather on their tops.

“Everything I’m going to show you here,” Holt took off his jacket, rolled up his shirt sleeves, pulled on thick riding gloves, and gave the other pair to Geralt, “is to be used solely for self-defence. I emphasise and underline this: solely for self-defence. You’re a witcher, not a hoodlum or a hothead. Bear this in mind.”

Geralt confirmed with a nod that he would.

“I am sure,” Holt continued, “that not much has changed in Kaer Morhen since my day, and back then we used to fight with our fists regularly. It’s nice to hit with your bare fist, isn’t it? It’s so nice and natural as though it ran in our veins. Besides, sometimes you can’t do it any other way than with your bare fists, especially, so to speak, in the heat of passion. However, when passion gives way to rational premeditation, you have to think about the risk of serious injuries to your hand, wrist, fingers, or all of them at once. Hitting with your bare hand sometimes has worse consequences for the attacker than for his opponent.”

“That’s why, young man, tools come in handy. I know, I know, you don’t have to remind me. Each of your swords has a pommel, it’s hard to find a better tool. It’s also worth getting a knife with a solid handle. A set of brass knuckles is useful. It doesn’t take up much space, and it can be very effective. A solid stick is also worth carrying, at least for dogs. They are much more dangerous than people.”

“Not to mention a sword, knife or brass knuckles, even a stick can be treated as a weapon, a dangerous tool, the use of which — even in defence — can have the consequences that I mentioned. That’s why it’s worth carrying something inconspicuous with you. A piece of metal, even a key. Oh, here you are. Just like this one.”

“Take it, from now on it will be your key. For your information, it doesn’t fit any lock, I found it in a dustbin.”

“Now let’s quickly go through what else can be found on a human head. For the demonstration, we will use these mannikins of boiled buffalo hide, they were tailor-made for me.”

“The bregma, or the frontal part!” Holt whacked the leather bust with all his might, so that dust rose and the pole swayed. “It’s the junction of the frontal and parietal bones, under which lie the frontal lobe and the motor cortex, the areas of the brain responsible for movement. A solid blow can incapacitate your foe. Now it’s your turn. Hit the bregma a few times. Great. Innate talent. Or is it a result of your training in the Stronghold?”

“The temple, contrary to popular belief, is not the best target at all. If anything, it is better to hit the sphenoid bone, located right here, I have marked it with paint.” Holt whacked the mannikin again. “The temporal artery runs under this bone. A blow causes bleeding and death. Of course, you shoud not forget my previous remarks. Murder is punishable by hanging. And you, I remind you, are learning to defend yourself, not to assault.”

“The orbital bones, you were probably taught this too, are a weak spot. The

force of the blow is transferred to the frontal lobe, the result is loss of consciousness. Now you try it. Strike!"

"The base and bridge of the nose, as anyone who fought in their youth knows, easily break and crumble from a blow. A straight blow to the nose causes severe pain and heavy bleeding, sometimes it can even take down your opponent. It is worth remembering that a braver and stronger opponent will not be taken down, such a blow will enrage him at most. Therefore, a much better target is — pay attention, this is important — the glabella, also called the smooth spot, located half an inch above the base of the nose. This is an incredibly sensitive point. A strong blow damages the frontal lobe, the result is concussion and loss of consciousness. Now, show me a few blows to the glabella. Great!"

"A quarter of an inch below the nose there is the so-called intermaxillary suture. A good target for your fist. The blow shatters the front teeth and nasal bones, which in itself is extra spectacular and highly effective. But that's not all. The jawbones are connected to the cranium, so the effect of the blow is usually a concussion. I have also heard -- I have not practiced it myself and have not experienced it -- that a strong and skilled blow to the intermaxillary suture is capable of damaging the second cervical vertebra, or more precisely the so-called dens of the vertebra, whatever that is. The effect, I was assured, is a trauma of the brain stem. Something like that will eliminate any assailant from the fight."

"Now a few words about the neck. A blow to the neck can kill if you hit accurately and hard at this spot, behind the ear, in the part of the skull called the mastoid process. I have also marked it with paint. A precise and powerful blow to that process, especially with something like your key, will rupture the vertebral artery, which runs right here, in the corresponding processes of the vertebrae. A severed vertebral artery means immediate loss of consciousness and inevitable death. If you absolutely have to kill someone, a blow to the the mastoid process is a sure way to do it. Next, show me a blow to the mastoid process. Once again! Good."

"The neck is primarily the larynx. In human males it is emphasized by the laryngeal prominence, also called the *prominentia laryngea*. Dwarves and gnomes, as you know, also have such prominence, elves and other humanoid races do not. Now back to the point: a blow to this spot results in internal bleeding, and the swollen soft tissues block the windpipe. Your opponent, if not helped immediately, suffocates. This is also a good way to kill someone. Especially if you have to do it quietly. I see that you want to ask something."

"That man, in Spynham… The one who was beating the woman. I didn't see what… Is he alive?"

"The ways of nature are sometimes unfathomable. But I don't see any reason to worry or bother about it at all. Let's keep training. Show me a few nice blows to the laryngeal prominence, Geralt. And that's where we'll end."

For dinner they had rabbit stewed with onion and celery.

****

The next day began with sticks. Three-foot-long oak batons worn out by use replaced swords for them.
As it turned out, Holt's lame leg didn't stop him from fencing. He moved like a spinning top.
He attacked without warning, Geralt parried by quarte to prime, then he warded off a molinetto with high right seconde. His counter-tierce in a half-spin was met with Holt's forte with tierce to quarte, Holt whirled and attacked with a lightning-quick feint. Geralt parried by prime and countered with a strong mandritto with a half-turn. Holt parried with high octave, it was an unusual sequence.
The sound of sticks echoed through the yard so loudly and with such a fast rhythm that it even attracted the land steward and the servant.
"Young Geralt, you tend to come out of the volte and strike with a mandritto. You have a strong mandritto, that deserter had a chance to find it out. Your blows are strong, but they lack grace and finesse…"
"And who needs grace and finesse? We fight to kill."
"But to avoid getting into a rut while you are killing, try a roverso for a change. Or, to use Vesemir's terminology, a sinister. I assure you, it is an equally deadly blow. Or the other way around, passo largo with the right foot, a half-turn, a molinetto and a roverso. Shall we try?"
They did.
For over an hour neither of them managed to hit the other with the stick. They might as well have fought without pads.
"Not bad, young witcher, not bad. Vesemir, as I can see, is still in shape and is still teaching quite well. *Finis*, that's all for today. And in conclusion of the training… A little keepsake."
He attacked as fast as lightning, gran passata with his right foot and such a strong molinetto that Geralt had to parry with his sabre. Holt bent his torso and performed a mandritto with a feint to Geralt's left temple, a molinetto, contratempo passo largo with his left leg, another molinetto, a tramazzone and…
Geralt saw stars, and before he knew it, he found himself on the ground. He landed hard on his buttocks. Swarms of bees were humming and buzzing in his head. He got hit in the temple, very hard. The leather pad served its turn though.
"What was that?" he asked, stunned.
"Grace, Geralt. Grace and finesse."

****

Holt's body, when he undressed in the bathhouse, turned out to be a map of injuries and a chronicle of adventures.

“This one here, that’s a kikimore.” He pointed to the row of crescent-shaped teeth marks on his left bicep. “It took me by surprise”.
A hideous scar on his shoulder blade turned out to be a memento of a sickler’s claws. The scar above his right hip was left by a griffin’s claw and his left shoulder was marked by a vypper’s fangs.
The most appalling mark appeared after a fight with a meganeura. The old witcher’s left thigh was deformed, and in addition to the jaw marks, it bore traces of surgical cuts and stitches from the hip almost to the knee.
“Besides,” Holt poured water from the bucket and slapped his back with a birch broom, “there’s one on the calf, here, look. Do you know who furnished me with this? A mongrel dog. I killed the son of a bitch. And don’t forget the skull, I get dizzy sometimes. I got hit in the head with a tankard in a tavern in Novigrad. Yes, yes, young Geralt. Witcher’s skin is a chronicle. In winter, when you return to Rocamora, we’ll look at you and count your memoirs. Because we can’t do without them. I’m not scaring you. I’m stating a fact.”
The medallion on Holt’s neck was in the shape of the head of a viper with large poisonous teeth.
Geralt hesitated to ask the question for such a long time that Holt finally answered without being asked.
“Yes, I was in Kaer Morhen at that time, thirty-five years ago. I’ll tell you about that someday. Not today.”
“But…”
“I went by a different name then. No wonder that Vesemir hid it from you, as I said, our paths diverged. And I took my real name and surname. I must say that I knew them.”
“When my mother abandoned me,” he explained, seeing Geralt’s questioning look, “somewhere in Kovir, as far as I know, she put a note into my baby basket. Sometimes those who can write add a note with personal information… usually just the date of birth of the foundling. Sometimes the first name, but sometimes the father’s name or even the father’s surname. The kind ladies from the Kovir orphanage kept the note and handed it over to the witchers who took me from the orphanage. And when I bid farewell to Kaer Morhen — and it wasn’t a hearty farewell — Vesemir revealed my real name to me. Because Vesemir, as well as old Byrnjolf before him, has an archive of such foundlings’ notes, but he doesn’t let anyone look into it. But sometimes he makes exceptions.”
“He does.” Geralt brightened up. “That’s how I know that my friend Eskel’s real name is Esau Kelly Kaminski. But Eskel didn’t like the surname. And it’s no wonder. So he came up with an abbreviation of both names.”
“And did Vesemir tell you your real name when you were leaving?”
“No.”

****

“When will you teach me that feint? That… grace? Mandritto, and then a

double molinetto and a tramazzone…"
"Firstly, I don't run a fencing school. And secondly…"
"Yes?"
"I have to keep some little secrets from you, don't I?"

****

"Here, try this on."
The jacket was made of soft leather, with silver studs on the shoulders and sleeves.
"It's brand new, but it won't button on my stomach anymore. As for you, ha, well, well, it fits you to a T. Well, from now on it's yours. And here's a pair of gloves to match. Don't thank me."

****

At last, it was mid-May, the beginning of the month of Blathe, and it was time to say goodbye to Rocamora, to the fist fights with the leather mannikins; to fencing with sticks, to a mattress stuffed with pea stalks, to beef rolls, cabbage rolls and pancakes with honey.
It was time to get back into the saddle.
Preston Holt adjusted the straps and belts on Geralt's saddlebags. He checked the girth and the buckles of the stirrup leathers. Stirrups.
Then he checked everything once again.
"You still haven't made up your mind," he finally stated, "regarding cooperation with me. I'm not insisting, I'm not forcing, I'm not offering a chirograph for you to sign. For now, we act according to the principles of mutual good will and trust."
The gates of Rocamora opened with a creak and a rasp.
"Hit the trail, witcher Geralt."

The southern border of the Lower March adjoins the Pontar River. The Mansfeld family, affluent and autocratic lords with their own army, had ruled there for ages. In the year 1215 after the Resurrection they invaded the kingdom of Aedirn, and having crossed the Pontar, set their marks on the Dyphne River, declaring it the new border of the March. King Videmont of Aedirn recognised this as a casus belli and attacked the aggressors with his entire army. After a series of severe battles the Mansfelds had been driven back beyond the boundaries of the Pontar. There have been constant clashes there ever since and the border is frequently called "flaming".
The Mansfelds' coat of arms is argent, a wild boar's head erased gules. This is also the emblem of the entire March.
Baldwin Adovardo, the New Description of the Kaedwen Kingdom

CHAPTER FIVE

To his Lordship Prefect of the Guard
Estevan Trillo da Cunha
to Ard Carraigh
Written: in Ban Fillim, May 22nd, in the 8th year of the reign of the Most Gracious King Miodrag

Your Lordship, Sir Prefect,
I humbly inform you that, in accordance with your order, I have taken the estate called Rocamora under strict supervision. Unfortunately, to my regret, I hereby notify you that I no longer have an informant inside the estate, for the suspect witcher Holt had gotten wind of something and kicked my informant out from the estate after a severe corporal punishment. The suspect Holt threatened, I beg your forgiveness, that he would rip the informant's legs out of his arse, which in itself proves his inappropriate conduct and calls for punishment. Therefore I can no longer know nor can I report what happens in the estate or what is said there, as much as I would like to, for which I beg your forgiveness.
Nevertheless I report that the second witcher, a youngster, who had been hiding in the Rocamora estate since early spring, left it on horseback around mid-May and headed for the Western March.
As for the suspect Holt, he did not move a step from the estate, and a medical doctor was called there, from which I conclude that Holt's lame leg is not in the best condiction. I humbly report this, I assure you of my undying obedience and wish you all the happiness, Your Lordship, Sir Prefect.
Respectfully yours,
Uger Zolteri, special agent of the Crown.

****

The little town of Belvoir lay in a forest valley. Geralt rode up a hill and could take a close look from there. He noted to himself that Belvoir was at least twice as big as Spynham, which he visited in March. The location of town's buildings also seemed much denser, a tangle of narrow streets, a real labyrinth, could be seen from the hill. It was a good thing then that Geralt's destination was located at the very edge and there was no need to fear getting lost in the labyrinth.
The town was surrounded by a ring of vegetable gardens and orchards, full of really beautiful blooming apple and cherry trees.
The building with a steep red-tiled roof was the only one in the street protected by a high fence, which prevented you from seeing what was behind it. The fence had a wide, double-leaf gate with a roof for horse-drawn carts. Deep ruts showed that carts often used that way. There was a wicket gate next to the double-leaf gate and above it hung a brass bell.

Geralt pulled the rope, the bell rang loudly and resonantly. After a moment the wicket gate opened and a doorman appeared.
The doorman was a big man in a short coat made of rabbit skins. One needed thirty such skins to sew a coat for an average-sized person. To sew such a short coat for the doorman you needed about thirty more of them.
He saw two hilts above Geralt's right shoulder, frowned, but pointed to the entrance gate without asking any questions. It opened immediately, and Geralt rode inside.
Two more men appeared in the small yard. They were of average size. They didn't wear rabbit jackets, but if they did, thirty skins would be enough for them. One of them immediately took care of the horse. The other silently took both swords from Geralt.
The house had an elegant porch with a balustrade, with a steep roof supported by four carved columns. Geralt was ordered to stand in front of the steps which led up to the porch.
He stood there for a long time. Definitely longer than Geralt could consider customary and acceptable. It was a good thing that at last a dark-skinned man in a purplish-red kaftan with gold floral embroidery and two rows of gimped buttons came out onto the porch. The man held a batiste handkerchief in his hand, with which he was wiping his mouth every now and then.
"Oh, youth," he said, staring into Geralt's black eyes, "what else you do, up and over the horizons rise and bloom with all your might. Ah, who of us hasn't been a child? Indeed, everyone."
Geralt didn't comment.
"If only," the man wiped his mouth with his handkerchief, "that youth wanted to be accompanied by a little experience, a little expertise, a touch of empiricism. But what of it? Ay, there's the rub: either this or that. Preston Holt, I expect, knows what he's doing?"
Geralt neither confirmed nor denied the statement.
"And what about you, young man, do you know what you're doing?"
Geralt shrugged. The man sighed.
"My name is Timur Voronoff."
"Geralt."
Timur Voronoff wiped his mouth with a handkerchief. He leant against the balustrade.
"Geralt. It's rather mundane. Wouldn't it better to embellish your assumed name with some "de"? Some nobiliary particle? Oh, I understand. You don't like talking. Do you prefer to brandish your sword? It's worthy of admiration and applause. Because it will increase my income too. Come in, there are things to discuss."
The invitation, as it turned out, did not apply to the house itself, but only to a large, but extremely sparsely furnished antechamber. Timur Voronoff showed Geralt a chair at the table, and he sat down opposite.

From the depths of the house came the voices of children, at least three of them. There was also a pleasant smell of scrambled eggs with bacon or ham. Voronoff finally folded his handkerchief and put it into his pocket.
“First of all,” he began, “we need to discuss the organisational and financial issues. I assume that your agreement with Holt is still in force? Because you did conclude some kind of agreement, didn’t you?”
“We act according to the principles of mutual good will and trust.”
“In other words, an oral agreement. Which doesn’t change the fact that you’re setting out on the witcher’s trail as his per procura.”
Geralt didn’t know what per procura was, but he guessed the meaning. And he confirmed it with a nod. “So, as it were, automatically,” Voronoff continued, “or *per facta concludentia*, you are bound by Holt’s agreement with me. That is, effective today, the 21st of May 1229, I am your exclusive agent on the territory of the kingdom of Kaedwen and all its four marches. My commission is ten percent of each of your witcher earnings.”
Geralt confirmed it with a nod.
“Now, the financial issues. Has Holt provided you with any funds?”
“I have fifty marks.”
“You will receive another fifty and three traveller’s cheques worth two hundred marks each for unforeseen events. You will settle up with me for these events, should they occur, according to the receipts, so do not forget to ask for such a receipt each time. As for your per diem allowance for your own maintenance and petty expenses, it will amount to five marks in a lump sum, starting from today. Of course, you can deduct this lump sum from your earnings.”
“How much you will demand for your witcher services, I leave to your discretion, I assume you have enough knowledge to be able to calculate the risk into the amount of payment. However, you should not spoil the market. By no means. Holt never took less than fifty crowns. Don’t sell yourself short either.”
“As a reminder: the mark is the official Kaedweni currency, but Novigrad crowns are in popular circulation here and prices, especially high ones, are often calculated in crowns. The average and relatively stable rate is five marks per crown.”
“Do not burden yourself with live coin unless necessary, deposit everything into my sub-account in dwarven banks or money exchange offices at the Vivaldi, Cianfanelli, Mantovani or Boni banks. I have open accounts everywhere, it will be enough to mention my name when making a deposit. If you were hired by some official establishment, for example, local authorities, it would usually be possible to settle immediately through the bank, without cash. Is that clear?”
Geralt confirmed with a nod.
“Speaking of cashless transactions, don’t accept any barter. Sometimes they will offer you a pork carcass, a pen of chickens or a night with a local beauty

for your services. The latter in particular may tempt you, but, I repeat, never accept that. And it's not just about the fact that it's hard for me to calculate my commission on such a barter. Don't spoil the market and your reputation. It's easy to lose, hard to restore."

The children inside the house fell silent. Apparently, it was time for dinner.

"As you probably know," Voronoff continued, "the kingdom of Kaedwen consists of a central district, called the royal district, surrounded by the Marches. The name "march", as you probably also know, comes from marks, or boundary signs…"

"I know that."

"When Kaedwen was founded," Voronoff didn't care about what Geralt knew, "it was supposed to have no strictly demarcated borders, each March's task and raison d'étre was to set its marks further and further and expand its borders. At first, this was exactly the case, but today the kingdom's borders have mostly stabilised. But the expansion, although on a much smaller scale, continues, settlers spread out in all directions and penetrate the border wastelands. And the wastelands, like all wastelands, are swarming with monsters. It seems to me that you won't complain about the lack of work anywhere."

"Let's get *ad rem* then," Voronoff definitely liked using words that were foreign to Geralt. "I suggest you go north, to the Upper March. The Great Road is being built there through the forests of the Kestrel Mountains. They have been looking for a witcher there for a long time. It has come to my attention that you and Holt have made enemies in that area, but don't worry it, I've tried to smooth things over."

"While you are on your way, interact with the local administration and look out for notices on boards at the crossroads. It's a common way of signalling for a witcher's help. There was a time when such notices weren't hung, and witchers weren't welcome anywhere in Kaedwen… You know that, don't you?"

"I do."

"Let me make things clear," Voronoff raised his head, "I don't teach you and don't test your knowledge. I perform the duties of an agent, and an agent's duty is to inform. So I'm proceeding with informing you. The bad times for witchers that I spoke of have quickly passed. People understood that when it comes to monsters or spells, they can expect salvation only from you, witchers. As for love: they don't love you here, in Kaedwen, or anywhere else, they don't throw themselves at your neck or scatter flowers at your feet, but when they're scared, they call for help and are ready to pay for it."

The children inside the house must have finished their breakfast, because they resumed creating a commotion. Voronoff looked back several times, he clearly hinted that it was time to end the audience. "Do you have any questions?"

Geralt was silent for some time. He was contemplating.

“That bad time for witchers,” he asked after a while, “was it around the year one thousand one hundred and ninety-four?”
“Around that time,” Voronoff squinted at Geralt, “that’s right.”
“Holt was in Kaer Morhen then, wasn’t he? What happened there?”
Voronoff looked at Geralt for some time. Then he wiped his mouth with a handkerchief.
“I gather from your question,” he finally said, “that Holt himself didn’t tell you anything. So why should I tell you?”
“An agent’s duty is to inform. Well, inform then.”
“I am informing you,” the agent replied after a moment of silence, “that I have nothing to inform you about the subject. And now I bid you farewell. Get in the saddle and hit the trail.”

You study bestiaries to gain knowledge about what you will have to fight. You should remember, however, that knowledge is not everything. Books will teach you about the familiar known — the monsters we are aware that we know. Books will also allow you to understand that there are familiar unknowns — monsters we are aware that we do not know. However, no bestiary or book will prepare you for the unfamiliar unknowns: the monsters we are not aware that we do not know.
Vesemir of Kaer Morhen

CHAPTER SIX

The village — a good thirty houses — lay in the bend of a river with flat, calamus-covered banks. Nearby, the surface of a small pond, surrounded by a ring of willows, gleamed in the sun. There was a forest behind the village, a black wall of thickets and old trees.

A bumpy road led straight to the village square. However, the access to the village was guarded by a solitary farm a couple of leagues away. A resonant clash of metal, audible despite the distance, came from there.

The first to notice him were the guinea hens rummaging among the nettles, raising an indescribable commotion. It is a common thing, almost all villagers keep guinea hens, and nothing reacts to intruders like guinea hens. Only when he was almost in the yard, the dogs woke up. They were barking fiercely, but luckily they were chained.

The sounds of metal came from an open construction with a roof. A fire flickered there, and sometimes steam would rise.

Geralt dismounted his horse, threw the reins over a hitching post.

Inside, in the flashes of flame, a teenage boy blew into the bellows, hanging on the ropes that put the mechanism in motion. A halfling in a leather apron stood by the anvil, hammering a horseshoe held in his tongs. He noticed Geralt, but continued hammering. Geralt waited and didn't come closer.

The halfling stopped hammering, immersed the horseshoe in the bucket. The horseshoe hissed, and puffs of stinking steam rose.

"Well?"

"The notice at the crossroads. "Witcher needed.""

The halfling threw the horseshoe on a pile of other horseshoes. He put down the hammer, wiped the sweat from his forehead. Covered in tar, in the flickering glow of the embers he looked like a little devil.

"Maybe we need one," he said, not looking at Geralt at all. "So what?"

"I'm a witcher."

"Really?" The halfling looked in disbelief. "You? A witcher? Since yesterday, methinks."

"A little longer."

"Aye, I see, a wee bit longer. No offence, but even though your hair is white, your face looks young. And you've got a thin beard. It's easy to make a mistake. So I wanted to make sure."

"I assure you. Who runs the settlement? And where can I find him?"

"It's not worth looking for 'im. And it's not worth entering the village either."

Geralt was silent for a moment. He wondered whether using swear words would be of any help.

"If I don't enter the village," he finally asked, "how will I get information about the notice? From whom?"

"From me."

The halfling signalled the boy to finally leave the bellows alone.

"What's your name?"

“Geralt.”
“And I’m Augustus Hornpepper, the local blacksmith. The notice at the crossroads is my artwork. Because I’m literate since I went to school. So the elders of the settlement entrusted me with the matter, that is, to write the notice and greet a witcher when he shows up. Welcome, then.”
“As for the village,” he continued, seeing that Geralt would not return the courtesy, “you mustn’t enter it. They warned me about it. By no means, do you understand?”
“No.”
“They don’t want you there!” the local blacksmith blurted out. “They don’t want you there, that’s it. I have been entrusted with the matter, talk to me and deal with me. With me. Because I am not only a halfling, but also a blacksmith. No spell can affect a halfling, and no evil spirit can harm a blacksmith. I am not afeared of a witcher.”
“And those in the village are afraid of me?”
“You must be joking. It is known that every kind of evil and nasty miasmas follow a witcher, that he can bring a pestilence, even a plague, any time. And then what, burn everything he touches? Moreover, there are plenty of young lassies in the village, and will you keep an eye on a witcher? He will charm her, fuck her and that’s it. Try and find a fool to marry her later.”
The blacksmith was baring his teeth while he was speaking. The lad, on the other hand, opened his mouth and looked at Geralt with a look full of fear.
“Well,” the halfling became serious, “enough with the jokes. Sit down here, on the bench.”
“Don’t you mind? Because you’ll probably have to burn it.”
“I’m not afeared. We are in a forge, spells don’t work here.”
Geralt sat down. Augustus Hornpepper also sat down, on the stool opposite. The boy also sat down on the clay floor in the corner.
“It’s been going on for a year,” the halfling began, “there came a pestilence to the village. The cattle started dying: heifers, oxen. The hens stopped laying. A peasant cut himself with a scythe when he was mowing hay. One woman had a miscarriage. A tyke fell from the attic and broke his leg. The village head got the shits and couldn’t leave the privy all day and night. In a word, too many misfortunes. People had pondered for a long time until they figured it out. There were spells at work.”
Geralt remained politely silent.
“And there lived an old hag in the village,” Augustus Hornpepper continued after a while. “An old hag, crooked like a bucket handle, with a wart on her nose. She was a herbalist. People saw her hanging around the henhouse, the one where the hens had stopped laying. She spat into the pond, and immediately the fish swam up belly up. So they took the old woman and threw her into the pond. Splash! They looked: she wasn’t drowning. That meant she was a witch. They fished her out…”
“And burned her.”

“Yes. But first they broke her neck.”
“I’m listening.”
Augustus Hornpepper hawked and spat into a bucket of water.
“The hag had a cat,” he continued. “A big black son of a bitch. You know what a witch needs a cat like that for. They wanted to catch it and burn it too, but it escaped them. It disappeared into the forest and that was all they saw of him.”
“And?”
“And that’s when it all began. A boy went for brushwood and disappeared. They found him three days later. His face had been scratched to the bone, half his hand had been bitten off, his stomach had been torn open, his guts had been dragged out. Then another one. The same thing: torn by claws, bitten, his intestines hanging out. Then another one, exactly the same. It was obviously the cat’s work. And it was confirmed.”
“What was confirmed? And how?”
“One man survived a month ago. He held his guts with both hands, but somehow he had managed to crawl to the village. Before he died, he confirmed it. It was a black cat, big as a calf. Then it was clear, they said. It was the witch’s cat. It had magically grown and was taking revenge for its mistress.”
“I’m listening.”
“No one goes to the forest anymore, only in a group. And it’s not easy to gather such a group, because everyone is afeared. And there are meadows in the forest, we have to mow there, or there will be no hay. So the elders decided to call a witcher. They collected the money and ordered a notice to be made. I made it and hung it. I am glad to see you so soon. I see, you carry swords. And I have their money in deposit. You kill the monster, I will pay you the money.”
“I have to kill a cat. The witch’s cat?”
Augustus Hornpepper was silent for a moment.
“I am a blacksmith,” he said finally, looking at the witcher penetratingly. “I am not afraid of any spells, albeit I cast the spells myself. And what did you think, how I make the hard iron soften and take any shape under the hammer? That is fiery magic and demonic power, nothing else. I am a halfling on top of that. I am immune to everything.”
Geralt did not comment. The blacksmith hawked and spat again.
“I am immune to everything,” he continued. “To the bullshit about witchcraft too. Because since the beginning of time the cattle would die and the hens wouldn’t lay. Fish die when the water blooms. Mowers cut themselves when they drink and take a scythe. And the village head’s shits? Does is have to be supernatural? And show me, my dear lord, something more natural than the shits. A simple conclusion comes to mind: there was no charms, no spells, no devilry. They broke an innocent woman’s neck, that’s all. I see that you are not at all moved by what I say.”

“I am immune too.”
“In your profession, you have to be, that’s obvious. Well, let everyone mind their own business. My business is the anvil and the hammer. An innocent woman’s murder is the business of the district head and the court. As for you, your witcher’s business is to deal with the thing that kills people in the forest. Because something kills. Although I bet it’s not the granny’s cat at all. So, what do you think, young witcher?”
“For the sake of simplicity,” Geralt replied after a moment, “let’s assume it’s a cat. Because that’s as good a name as any. Let’s get down to details. How much do you have in your deposit? How much will the village pay me for a cat?”
The blacksmith was silent again for a while. Then he smacked his lips.
“They told me,” he finally said, “to drive a hard bargain with you. Starting with two hundred… Wait, don’t shake your head, let me finish. They, poor as they are, aren’t worth haggling over. They’re willing to give a maximum of five hundred marks, that’s what they’ve put down. And let’s settle that, without haggling.”
He took Geralt’s silence for acceptance, and rightfully so.
“Of course,” he added casually, “I won’t pay you in advance. Even a down payment is out of the question. I understand their concerns. Because if, for example, the local people who murdered an innocent woman considered me to be a disgusting freak, spreading plagues and miasmas, a pervert with a taste for lassies, and hated me as much as they hate you… I wouldn’t consider it too unethical to take the money in advance and run away. Let’s do it their way. Haven’t you thought about it?”
“No. Not for a moment.”
“I thought so. In fact, I was certain. But it won’t hurt to ask, right?”

****

The edge of the forest was about a quarter of a league away from the forge. Midway there stood something that had probably been a hay cart in the autumn, but now it had turned into overgrown debris, the only things left of its former glory were the frame and wheels, made by the wheelwright from a material better than all the rest. Three wheels, the fourth was broken. It was easy to guess that the damaged cart had been abandoned in a panic after the horse had been unharnessed, so that it could run away more quickly. And there was noone brave enough to come back for the vehicle later.
Geralt stopped at the cart, observed the edge of the forest for a moment. Then he began preparations in accordance with the rules that had been instilled in him in Kaer Morhen.
He drew his sword. The weapon was quite different from ordinary combat swords of this class. The witcher’s sword, forged from steel from a meteorite, had a total length of forty and a half inches, of which the blade was twenty-seven and a quarter inches. Ordinary swords had blades that were either an

inch shorter or an inch longer. The witcher's sword weighed thirty-seven ounces. Ordinary swords, even the shorter ones, were usually much heavier. He checked the sharpness of the blade. In fact, he didn't need to, because he had only checked it yesterday. But those were the rules.

He took a small box out of his bag, pressed with his finger a secret latch that opened the lid. Dark glass phials were tightly packed inside the box's padded compartments. Their closures were arranged in neat rows, like soldiers on a drill. Geralt closed his eyes. He could — he had to — recognise the phials by touch, their place in the box and the unique shape of the closure, easy to recognise with the fingertips. He touched the phials, recognized the ones nearby. Healing potions: Golden Oriole, Black Gull and Lapwing. Morphing potions: Wagtail, Blackbird and Heron. Metamorphing potions: Nightjar and Rosefinch.

He took a sip of two potions: Blackbird and Heron. He decided that should be enough. He headed briskly towards the forest, through the grass that reached above his knees. The sunset was the colour of smoked salmon.

****

Much later — very reluctantly, by the way — Geralt would recall that event. And he would always come to the conclusion that he had only survived by accident and his own merit in surviving was minimal. His life was saved, first and foremost, because of the season. Secondly, because the cat he was supposed to kill was not a cat at all.

****

The forest was springtime, sparse, bright in the moonlight. And in a springlike manner, it was carpeted with rotten leaves and last year's fallen dried fruit. Despite that, if a cat had attacked from ambush, the attack would have been silent. But it was not a cat, its claws were not hidden in the soft pads of its paws. And the crunch of a dry twig betrayed the creature. The witcher's reactions after the potions were fast enough for him to avoid the treacherous attack.

Geralt jumped back, or rather threw himself to the side, fell to his knees, the body of the attacking monster only brushed against him, its claws barely grazing his shoulder. The monster coiled in a jump like a ribbon, attacked again before it even touched the ground. Geralt didn't have time to get up from his knees, but he did manage to draw his sword and strike the monster. The blow was not accurate, the blade of the sword only brushed the creature's flat head and shaved off a part of its scalp along with a bunch of tentacles growing on its forehead. The weazl — Geralt already knew it was a weazl — fell to the ground shaking its head and spraying blood everywhere. It looked more like a lizard than a large cat, although those bunches of tentacles on its head could indeed resemble cat ears, and the white fangs in

its maw also resembled feline teeth. The creature also used its long tail when it was whipping dry leaves, like a cat, as a rudder to balance its jumps.
The weazl lunged at the witcher with a long leap. Geralt dodged again, but this time without grace, with a jump more desperate than skilful. But he managed to deliver another blow, wide and haphazard, but accurate, almost chopping off one of the weazl's front clawed paws. Despite this, the monster caught the witcher with the claws of its other paw, but the claws, instead of tearing the flesh, only grated on the silver studs of his jacket. The weazl fell on the grass, and the witcher slashed from above, with all his might. Blood was spurting out in a fountain, the monster howled terribly, and despite its cut belly, it was already throwing itself into another attack. Geralt jumped, struck, the blade reached the spine, the weazl curled up, screaming terribly, almost like a human, the witcher cut once more, the blade reached the spinal cord. The weazl struggled, tearing the earth with its claws. Geralt cut again, cutting the vertebrae in another place. The weazl screamed and thrashed, Geralt cut. And screamed too. The weazl howled, Geralt cut. Again and again, like a woodcutter with an axe. The weazl no longer howled, it only screeched. It took a while — and more blows — for Geralt to stop.
The moon emerged from behind the clouds, shining through the leafless branches of the trees. In its glow, the spattered blood was pitch-black.
Geralt fell to his knees and vomited. He vomited for a long time. And since he had eaten almost nothing for a long time, the process was very, very burdensome.
Geralt was vomiting up the potions that burned the oesophagus like fire.

The discovery of a new dish is a greater happiness for humanity than the discovery of a new star.
Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin

CHAPTER SEVEN

The monthly meeting of the Noble Brotherhood of Gourmets was called — as usual — for the first Wednesday of the month, which fell on the third day of July. The venue, as usual, was the knights' hall of the royal palace in Ard Carraigh. The full complement of twenty-three members of the Brotherhood sat down at a horseshoe-shaped table. The gossip and chit-chat over Toussaint wine and salted almonds was interrupted by the solemn entrance of the twenty-fourth member of the Brotherhood, the King of Kaedwen, His Highness Miodrag the First.

The King entered the hall alone, without pomp or fanfare, and he was greeted without pomp, without rising from his seats or applause.

"Greetings, esteemed Companions," the King began, as soon as he had sat down in the seat of honour in the middle of the table.

During the meetings of the Brotherhood, its members, regardless of their titles and ranks, called themselves Companions. The king himself was not a king at that time, but a President.

"We owe the dish with which we will delight our palates today, a true delicacy," the President continued in a matter-of-fact way, "as well as many previous dishes, to the esteemed Companion Metzgerkop, owner of many restaurants familiar to us. And here is that dish! Please!"

The speech was rewarded with toasts. The wine from Toussaint quickly disappeared, and the lackeys briskly fetched more jugs.

The *praefectus culinae*, the royal chief cook, entered the hall and stood proudly erect. Behind him, like soldiers on a parade, marched four potbellied undercooks in snow-white aprons and caps, armed with long knives and cleavers as big as war bardiches. Four kitchen boys appeared in the wake of the undercooks, bending under the weight of a huge wooden plate. On the plate, surrounded by baked apples, rested…

The companions gasped in unison.

"By the gods!" exclaimed the priest Immergut. The priest often swore by the gods and invoked their authority. As to whether he believed in them, there were reasonable doubts. "By the gods, Esteemed President! What is this?"

"A bird," declared Abelard Levesley, the king's chief prosecutor, after taking a sip from his goblet. "This is obviousy a bird. I mean, a fowl."

It was hard to deny the prosecutor's point within reason. The thing resting on the plate had skin ruddy from roasting, speckled with the pimples of plucked plumage, as well as wings, thighs, neck and rump, which the chefs had decorated with a dozen or so green feathers, sparkling like a peacock's. As for the neck, it stuck up like a ship's mast, about a fathom long, and it ended with a head — a skull — the size of a watermelon, armed with a massive beak at least a cubit long.

The whole fowl, deliciously smelling of roast and marjoram, weighed, measured by eye, about three hundred pounds.

"It weighs about three hundred pounds," estimated Rupert Mansfeld,

margrave of the Lower March. “Measured by eye.”
“This is the roc,” declared Acteon de La Milleraie, marshal of the royal heralds’ office, secretary of the Brotherhood. “Without a doubt, it is the legendary roc.”
“Legendary it is,” said Sirius Vaikinen, margrave of the Lakeland March, in a deep voice. “The roc is a mythical bird. There are no such birds!”
“They exist,” denied Vlastibor of Glade, ambassador of the Kingdom of Redania. “You can see them on the Skellige Isles, rarely, that’s true, but you can. Though the rocs look different. This one here is like an ostrich… A huge ostrich?”
“It’s not an ostrich,” retorted Mansfeld. “Just look at that beak. That’s some fucking monstrosity.”
“A monstrosity indeed,” smiled Jan Eychenholtz, chief huntsman of the Crown, maliciously. “Well, Esteemed President, and you, Companion Metzgerkop! Isn’t that some kind of hoax? An artificially made composite of different parts of different animals?
“I deny,” denied the king, before the outraged Ezra Metzgerkop could jump up from his chair. “I deny the fact that it’s a hoax or composite. Besides, let science speak. Companion Croft!”
“I suppose,” supposed the aged Euclides Croft, chancellor of Ban Ard Academy of Magic, “that it’s one of the so-called birds of doom. Probably an elephant bird, Aepyornis maximus. But those birds are extinct…”
“Let them die out, damn them”, Mansfeld shouted. “The important thing is that one survived and got roasted. It looks delicious and it smells wonderful! Come on, gentlemen chefs, let’s continue to cut up this upyeranus!”
“Before we cut up the bird,” decided King Miodrag, “esteemed Companion Metzgerkop will treat us with a story. We will learn how this aepyornis ended up on our table. Companion Metzgerkop, please!”
Ezra Metzgerkop took a sip from his goblet and cleared his throat.
“You probably know, esteemed Companions,” he began, “who witchers are. So, a week before the Solstice, a certain witcher appeared in the Western March, in the city of Berentrode. And so it happened…”

****

Illustrissimus
Estevan Trillo da Cunha
Praefectus vigilum Ard Carraigh
Ex urbe Berentrode, 23 mens. June anno 1229 p. R.

Illustrissime Sir Prefect,
immediately after receiving the notification regarding the incriminated witcher, as the importance of the matter required, I took care of it *statim* and sent my agents *non neglexi* as soon as possible to follow his every move. For how could I not strive enough for law and order, when on my shoulders lies

this duty? I am *semper* at Your Lordship's beck and call and I am ready to execute any your order *statim*.
As for the agents' reports: either this witcher is cunning and knows how to sweep the traces of his misdemeanours with his tail like a *vulpes*, or in fact he is an innocent simpleton, which is hard to believe. Nevertheless, I dare to note that this witcher, *nota bene*, Gerald by name, contributed greatly to the good of our area by killing the man-eating monster in the bogland. He did not cast spells on anyone, did not steal or scheme, did not seduce girls. He did not get drunk in taverns or start any fights, although, as I know, the local scoundrels tried to pick on him.
One of my special observers tried so hard that he *investigavit* in the stables at night to catch this Gerald *in flagrante* but to no avail. Therefore we should assume that it is *probabiliter* falsehood and a lie, that witchers are used to copulate with mares, goats and other beasts.
Nevertheless, I will not stop in my efforts and I will continue to *invigilare* this witcher Gerald, as long as he is in Berentrode. And it is said that he intends to move towards the Upper March, where the Great Road is being constructed. I will not fail to inform Your Lordship Sir Prefect about this.
Iterum I assure Your Lordship Sir Prefect of my constant readiness to serve and I wish you prosperity etc. etc., your humble servant,
Didier Hahn, *magister civium*

****

From the side of the swift river which splashed on the boulders, women's screams and the beating of batlets could be heard. About twenty washerwomen were working on the bank. Some were furiously beating with their batlets the pieces of clothing spread out on the wet stones. Others were hanging washed laundry on the shrubs. Still others, in pairs, were folding the dry clothes and putting them in baskets.
Every single one of them was shouting, trying to outshout each other. To make matters worse, children were rummaging through the thickets by the shore, probably the progeny of the washerwomen. The children were also shouting. Incessantly.
Geralt nudged his horse with his heel and guided it to the mill, a building partially hidden by a leafy and already beautifully green willow. He passed a group of young men sitting on the high bank, waiting for one of the heavily tucked-in washerwomen to lean over the laundry and present a pleasant view.
Geralt was ashamed of himself, but he also stared at the women for a while. The mill wheel was turning, rumbling, the water was foaming, falling from the paddles, and pouring with a roar over the wooden hoop and the culvert. Several carts stood on the dam, probably with a grain delivery or to collect the milled grain.
Two carts, harnessed to Percherons, were also standing near the mill race

and the mill pond, spread wide among the willows and alders. There was some activity on the pond as well. Geralt rode up closer.
Four peasants in straw hats, immersed in water up to their waists, were prodding the bottom of the pond with poles. Occasionally they would raise the poles, and the witcher noticed that each pair of poles had a woven willow trap or a sack attached to it. The villagers would load the catch from the traps into sacks hanging around their necks, and then resume dredging the bottom.
“They are catching crayfish,” explained a fat and rather richly dressed gentleman in a fox hat, seeing Geralt’s interest. “There are plenty of them here, especially the big ones. Oh, please, my dear sir, take a look. Please come closer, please come closer.”
Encouraged, Geralt rode up to the cart. Indeed, there were already a dozen or so wicker baskets there, in which numerous crustaceans were lazily moving, crunching among the nettle leaves.
“That’s for my inn,” explained the gentleman in the fox hat. “You see, I am a restaurateur, I profit greatly from crayfish, that is, in season. You will not taste crayfish soup like mine, my dear sir, anywhere else in the world. Don’t you believe me?”
“I take your word for it.”
“Visit my place and I will prove it! It is *The Crayfish and Snails Inn* in Ban Fearg, part of the famous restaurant chain of Mr. Metzgerkop from Ard Carraigh. It is thirty miles to my inn from here, from Berentrode,. It is far, but you will not catch so many crayfish any closer. I invite you… Wait, my dear sir, are you, by any chance, the witcher who is the talk of the town?”
“It is I,” confirmed the witcher. “And, in fact, it is true.”
“Well, well,” the restaurateur put his hands on his hips. “So young, and already such fame! Everyone is talking about this monster you slaughtered in the suburban swamps. Now it is finally safe there, before that they didn’t dig peat out of fear, because the monster killed someone every now and then. They were afraid of it like the plague, and no wonder, because it was supposedly terrible, a real horror. And you, my dear sir, they say, killed it! Well, well, so young…”
Geralt couldn’t help but smile. He had dealt much better with the kikimore in the bogland than with the weazl. Better and neater. Still without finesse and grace, perhaps, but definitely neater.
“And now, my dear sir,” the restaurateur continued, “you are here, at the mill. I presume, it is dangerous here too?”
“Someone supposedly saw some monster here,” Geralt revealed.
“Supposedly, I repeat. But it was at night. Apparently. During the day, in this hustle and bustle, nothing will show up here. I’m just checking the area to…”
He didn’t finish. Ear-piercing screams came from the river and the women washing the linens. Screams of pain and terror.
Geralt didn’t wait, turned and reared his horse.

The first thing he noticed from a distance were bright splashes of blood on the drying linen. And a few bodies.
Now the screams were coming from the dam. That's then he saw it.
It was a huge bird looking similar to an ostrich, but it had a large head and a huge beak. And it was exactly fifteen feet tall. There existed no such huge ostriches. The bird had a protruding crest on its forehead, a blue dewlap and a large tuft of green feathers on its rump.
The bird rushed onto the dam in great leaps, catching the fleeing men. It pecked one in the head and knocked him down, kicked the other, wounding him with the claw of its three-toed leg. It saw Geralt, opened its beak wide, so that its gullet could be seen. And it screamed. Like a peacock — but ten times louder.
The witcher's horse got spooked by the scream, bucked and reared up. Geralt fell, hit his back against a stone and couldn't breathe. The horse lashed out and galloped off into the distance.
The bird reached Geralt in impressive leaps. Geralt was lying on his back and couldn't draw his sword, but he extended his hand and treated the bird to a Sign. Feathers flew around. Realizing that the witcher was a hard nut to crack, the bird jumped up, screamed again and in strange leaps lunged at the people who were running towards the carts with the crayfish. The Percherons of the first cart got tangled in the harness, almost toppling the vehicle. The bird pecked the left outrunner in the head, blood squirted up high. The carter jumped off the coach box, tried to run away, the bird caught up with him, pecked him and kicked him. Then it saw the restaurateur and squawked. The restaurateur squawked too. Probably just as loud. He ran behind the cart, then dashed towards the mill. And towards Geralt. The bird bristled its crest, screamed and ran after him.
Geralt was already running, sword in his hand.
"Get down!" he shouted to the restaurateur. "On all fours!"
The restaurateur, surprisingly, obeyed immediately. He fell on all fours. Geralt, with momentum, jumped on his back, leapt up high and slashed with a sweep. Right into the blue dewlap.
The bird's head flew off towards the pond. The bird itself, spouting blood from its neck, dashed along the edge of the mill race. It ran about half a hundred steps before it collapsed into the bulrushes. And it kicked with its clawed legs for a few more minutes.
"But you said…" the restaurateur panted as Geralt helped him to his feet. "You promised that nothing would show up here… And how do you like that… I barely escaped with my life, right, thanks to you, my dear sir… And my carter is killed…"
"I think he's alive. We have to help him."
The carter had a cut on his head, it was bleeding heavily. He also had deep cuts on his back. The bird, as it turned out, had massive spurs on its legs and it knew how to cripple people with them. Geralt dressed the carter's wounds

as best as he could, with the strips of linen he was given.
A crowd was already gathering, people were looking at the carcass. One of the crayfish catchers fetched the severed head.
“Oh…” the restaurateur groaned. “What the hell is that? I mean, what it was…”
“An elephant bird,” Geralt replied. “Also called aepyornis. It is very rare. Where did it come from? And why did it attack with such fury?”
“Two dead!” someone from the crowd shouted. “Six wounded!”
“What a damned monster!”
“Bring me the head!” Geralt demanded. “It’s my trophy. As well as the entire aepyornis. Leave the carcass alone, drive away the dogs!”
“Aha,” the restaurateur guessed, scratching his beard. “You are a witcher after all. You’re thinking of cashing in for the bird, right?”
“Right.”
“ Well, then… I may have a proposition. I’ll pay you for the whole bird, including the head, let’s say… Two hundred… Well, my dear sir, let it be two hundred and fifty Novigrad crowns…”
“Do you want it… for your inn?”
“Exactly. Poultry is poultry, so what if it’s big? So, what do you think? The mayor of Berentrode won’t give you more, I know him, he’s stingy with city funds, because he’s drawing his income from them himself, he and his whole family. While I’ll pay in cash. We’ll ride to the nearest bank, my dear sir, and…”
“It’s a deal. Let’s ride there. Where’s my horse? Has anyone seen it, people? A dun mare, saddled…”
“I’ve seen it, of course! Your servant was leading it. Over there, towards the town!”
“What servant, damn it?”

****

One should have put a big banner on the front wall of Berentrode town hall saying “Get the fuck out of here with your petition”. It would have been very reasonable, and it would have saved petitioners a lot of time and effort, which could be used for the public good.
Nevertheless Didier Hahn, the mayor of the town, didn’t wear a gorget around his neck with the warning words “a mean prick” engraved on it. It’s a pity because it would also spare many people unpleasant experiences.
“I urge you not to slander, witcher,” he said coldly, after listening to Geralt’s complaint. “There are neither horse thieves nor common thieves in Berentrode. This is a law-abiding town, inhabited by honest people. No one steals here.”
“Do you want to say that my horse stole itself?”
“I don’t know. I’m not your horse’s guardian.”
“So, there won’t be any investigation?”

“None. I have neither the means nor the people for it. My people are busy investigating… They are busy with other matters. And your tales about a stolen horse resemble not only slander, but also fraud. You want to swindle a penny from the city treasury, don’t you? Don’t make me order to throw you in the pit!”
“In accordance with the imperial edict of the year 1150 of King Dagread, witchers are exempt from local jurisdiction…”
“I’ll throw you in the pit and we’ll see if King Dagread can get you out of it! Enough of this jabbering, I don’t want to hear about it anymore! Go away! Leave the town hall, and the town too!”
“On foot?”
Didier Hahn puffed angrily. He stood up from his desk and walked around the room.
“Alright,” he said. “Have it your way. Even though you’re a witcher, and for me you’re just an ordinary vagrant and a rogue, even though you’re trying to cast suspicion on the people of my city, even though you should be chased away from here with whips… In recognition of killing that monster in the peat bog and for the people you saved from that damned bird at the mill, I’ll give you advice. My relative, Beniamin Hunnicut, runs a stud farm here. He has beautiful horses. If you show up on my recommendation, he’ll give you a discount. Don’t thank me.”
Geralt didn’t thank him.
“And that bird at the mill,” the mayor suddenly became interested, “where is it? I mean, its carcass?”
“On its way to Ban Fearg, covered in ice.”
“Really? It’s a pity. I would pay for the head… I’d have one for my collection. Take a look.”
Geralt only just now noticed a cabinet and a showcase. The showcase contained various curiosities, mostly bones. A huge egg stood on a stand in the honourable place, in the centre of the showcase. It was an empty egg.
“They brought it to me the day before yesterday,” Didier Hahn boasted. “Hunters found a nest and this egg. A true rarity, isn’t it? Too bad that you don’t have the head. I have the egg, I’d like to have the head too. Too bad, too bad.”

****

“Do I have horses? By non-existent gods, do you ask me whether I have horses? You’d better ask me how many I have. Let me guide you, young witcher. Be careful not to step in shit, he-he. Well, I told you. And now look at this corral.”
“Do you see what kind of foals these are? These young stallions like a picture? These are purebred hot-blooded Novigrad steeds, the dream of every rider. Tails like silk veils, and hindquarters? Show me a wench with such shapely hindquarters. Every single one is a dream, he-he, I’m not talking

about hindquarters. I say and I swear, for such a horse any knight would let me plough his wife without batting an eye, he-he, or his daughter, or both, I tell you. What? You are not a knight? And you have neither wife nor daughters? Ha, then there's nothing to be done about it and it's harder to proceed, he-he. Then there's no other way, you have to fork out, he-he, and I have to see the silver coins pouring. Usually I take two hundred and fifty Novigrad crowns for each of my stallions, in local currency that would be one thousand two hundred and fifty marks. However, since you're a witcher, a noble profession, and you are here on Mayor Hahn's recommendation, I'm ready to drop the price… Well, let it be… ten percent. That's how much I'll drop. Let it be known around the world that a witcher rides a horse from my stud farm. And it's a colt from Berentrode, from me, that is, from Benjamin Hunnicut…"

"What? It's not a stallion that you want? That chestnut mare, that's sticking her head out from the stable? Of course it's for sale, why not, this is a stud farm, not a gallery of paintings, a place to sell, not to admire, he-he. How much for this filly? Well, I'm willing to sell it at a loss, let me count… two hundred crowns. As for a brother, he-he."

"But how could it be, a witcher on a mare, instead of a stallion? Rather dishonourable. What do you say? That it's the least of your problems? Ha, our client is the boss, if he wants a mare, he gets a mare. But, he-he, mister witcher, horses are like fish. I'm offering you a steed as if it were a big pike, and you choose a roach. What are you laughing at? Did I say something funny?"

****

Ingo Xmutt rode along the Great Road, whistling merrily. The hooves of his stolen dun mare clattered briskly against the planks with which the road had just been paved. Xmutt was cheerful and he had money — he had sold the contents of the saddlebags he had borrowed along with the mare at a fair which he had stumbled upon shortly after the successful expropriation of the horse. Now he was heading briskly north. He did not intend to travel far along the Great Road, and he did not look forward to meeting the road builders and their superiors. He planned to turn northwest, onto the forest paths leading to the Hengfors mountain passes. He intended to sell the horse in Hengfors, and with the money he had acquired he could settle temporarily in one of the villages near Barefield. Maybe even spend the winter there.

With a clatter of hooves he rode onto the bridge over a forest river, the banks of which were covered with nettle. Suddenly, he was no longer alone. For two days and two nights he met only about three wagons and three people on the new road. And now he suddenly found himself surrounded by ten people. To make matters worse, they were on horses and armed. To make matters still worse, they surrounded him tightly, from all sides.

"Hey," he pretended to be cheerful. "Gentlemen soldiers! And I was already

afraid that you are bandits… Allow me to introduce myself, I am Raul Azevedo… In the service of the margrave…"
He was afraid that he overdid it with the noble title, because he did not look like a nobleman at all. But soldiers, he thought, are not too sharp…
"In the service of the margrave," drawled the commander of the armed men, a moustachioed man in an elk jacket, with a gilded baldric, and a hat with a bunch of ostrich feathers. "A nobleman, judging by your title. And this dun mare, I presume, comes from the margrave's stable? Am I right?"
"Yes, it's true, true," Ingo Xmutt hastily confirmed. "From the margrave's stables, of course. You, sir knight, can recognise any horse…"
"I can," Captain Reisz Carleton confirmed dispassionately. "Just one glance at the horse is enough for me, I'll recognise it, I won't forget it. That's how I know whose horse you're riding, Master Azevedo, or whatever your real name is. And I also know that the rightful owner of this horse wouldn't have sold, pledged, lent or given it to you."
The horse thief licked his lips. He looked around nervously. There was no way to escape, the horsemen were surrounding him on all sides. And at a signal from the commander, they suddenly grabbed him by the arms with an iron grip, almost lifting him from the stolen saddle. Captain Carleton looked around.
"Mister Aelvarr!"
"Mister Captain?"
"Do you see that oak tree with such a pretty bough? Please throw a noose on that bough."

These are the words of the Prophet: verily I say unto you that chaos will arise in divers places and fire will often break out. The sun will shine at night and the moon during the day, and thereupon the stars will start falling. Trees will bleed and stones will speak, wild beasts will attack and pregnant women will give birth to monsters.
And now the prophecy has come true so that we could see: women have given birth to monsters. These monsters are witchers, harbingers of chaos and destruction.
Anonymous, Monstrum or the Description of a witcher

CHAPTER EIGHT

Illustrissimus
Praefectus vigilum
Estevan Trillo da Cunha
to Ard Carraigh
Datum die 26 mens. Iulii anno 1229 p. R.

Your Lorship Sir Prefect,
I kindly inform you that the witcher called Geralt arrived at the construction site of the Great Road in July, where I soon hired him for protection. He proved useful at first, having killed two forest monsters called leshies, which caused terrible atrocities at our construction site.
In accordance with the order of Sir Prefect, I asked him twice about the year one hundred and ninety-four and that incident, which Sir Prefect had ordered me to inquire about. Pretending to be outraged, I told him that the offence was terrible, that it was a hideous, atrocious crime, calling for punishment. The witcher listened, but did not utter a single word, he did not allow himself to be drawn into any discourse, and generally gave the appearance that the matter did not concern him in any way.
The other time during our conversation I mentioned specific names, as Sir Prefect ordered: Margulies and Chwalba. However, again the witcher did not allow himself to be provoked, he did not pretend to be interested, he did not ask anything and did not support the conversation with a single word.
From which I conclude that the witcher Geralt is not aware of any details concerning that incident. It is difficult to guess the real age of witchers, although in my opinion this same Geralt is no older than *decem et octo*, so in 1194 he wasn't even born.
I also inform you that the witcher is no longer working for me. My road builders wanted to hire him to track down and kill forest elves, who had become too impudent, but the witcher refused, saying that elves are intelligent beings and that he did not intend to kill them. So I dismissed him and ordered him to leave. Where he went, I have no idea.
Pax vobiscum,
Michaelides Blaufall, *praefectus stratificum*

****

The temple building of the goddess Melitele was surrounded by a wall, it was located near the town of Frankthal, situated in the valley of the same name. The valley was extremely picturesque, its bend cut into steep slopes. A pine forest covered the whole northern slope, while the southern slope was overgrown with white-trunk birches, beeches and oaks. A brook hid itself on the southern slope, it fell down in several cascades, and finally flowed windingly along the bottom of the valley.

Geralt urged Roach and waded the stream.
The temple of the goddess Melitele, one of the few that remained, was located in an old elven palace called Elsborg, that was situated about a league from the town of Frankthal, in a bend of the stream, among large weeping willows. Usually the area was deserted, so Geralt was a bit surprised to see a group of people at the temple gate. However, he didn't intend to ponder the phenomenon. He rode closer.
"And what's he doing here?" he heard. "Who is this vagrant?"
"Leave him alone, fellows. He's not a wench, and we're supposed to chase only wenches away from here, right?"
The witcher dismounted. The temple gate was too low to ride in on horseback. He knocked.
"Hey, you!" he heard again. "And what are you looking for here? Are you in cahoots with those whores? With child murderers? Maybe you're cut from the same cloth as them? Hey! I'm talking to you!"
The man who tried to grab him by the sleeve was quite big, but not big enough, Geralt judged, to take a hit and keep standing. He felt for Holt's key in his pocket. He wondered which would be a better target -- the orbital bone or the glabella, located half an inch above the bridge of the nose?
The man must have read something in the witcher's eyes, because he took a step back and gulped. The witcher was almost ready, clenching his fist with the key, when the gate opened and the high priestess appeared. He remembered her, she had always been smart. She realised the situation immediately.
"Come on in," she said sharply. "Quickly. Now."
She closed the gate behind him and barred the door.
"Hello, Nenneke."
"Hello, Geralt. You've grown up. I remember you as a little boy. Your head barely reached above the waistband of my skirt. And now, look at you, a strapping young man with swords on his back… A first-rate witcher."
"And I remember you as an adept. And now you are a priestess…"
"That scene at the gate," she measured him with a penetrating glance, "would have been very stupid."
"But I didn't do anything."
She sighed.
"We keep teaching you, and you still do things your way."
"You haven't taught me everything," he replied bitterly. "And that's a shame. I don't know what an orbit is. Or a chirograph. I don't know what sustentation means. Or what *per pro core* is. Or ultimately…"
"To ultimately educate yourself," she interrupted sharply, "you should sign up for courses in Oxenfurt in the winter as a lecture goer. Read books in your free time."
"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to…"
"But you did. Bring your horse here, to the stable."

They went out into the alley leading to the main building.
“Have you been on the trail for a long time? When did you leave the Keep?”
“In March. The day before the Equinox.”
“Have you travelled far?”
“Actually… I’ve only been to Kaedwen.”
“Only Kaedwen?” she was surprised. “And you wanted to see the ocean, I remember. Arcsea, Novigrad, Gors Velen…”
“Maybe, someday. I killed a few monsters in Kaedwen…”
“You braggart. Is that why you are here? To brag, to complain about our teachings? Is there anything else? Elixirs? But you’re not injured or sick, are you? You don’t look it.”
“The elixirs will come in handy, I drink them like water. But most of all… I’d like to talk to Mother Assumpta.”
“Aha.” Nenneke didn’t look at him. “You must have important matters to discuss. And Mother Assumpta is very busy. I don’t know if she’ll accept you.”
“We won’t know until we check.”
“Smart arse.”
They passed the garden. The priestesses and adepts toiling in the beds watched them on their way. Some waved at him, but he didn’t remember them. No wonder, when he’d last seen them, they’d been little girls. And after all, nothing in the world changes as quickly as girls.
They walked further.
Under a roof, open on all sides for ventilation, several adepts in masks on their faces and long gloves were working making soap, mixing lyes, sodas, oils and some intensely scented perfumes in large vats. Geralt knew that soaps from Elsborg enjoyed a well-deserved reputation even beyond the borders of Kaedwen. When he was studying in the temple, he himself was forced to use such soaps. In Kaer Morhen only scentless grey soap was used. It was not — at least not only — about contempt for perfumes and the effeminacy associated with them. The vast majority of monsters had a very sensitive sense of smell, and some were even unimaginably sensitive. The unnaturally smelling witcher had no chance against them.
“They’re throwing us out of here,” Nenneke said suddenly.
“What?”
“They’re throwing us out of here,” she repeated, narrowing her eyes. “One of the reasons… not the only one… is you, boys from Kaer Morhen. Word got out that we taught you here.”
The priestess knocked on an oak door. They were allowed to enter.
Assumpta of Rivia, the temple’s chief priestess, sat behind a desk covered in parchments. Geralt had last seen her eight years ago. She had put on weight since then. And her hair had gone grey.
She was accompanied by two priestesses and an adept. The priestesses smiled at him. He knew both of them. Flavia taught history. Ailidh taught the Elder Speech. He didn’t know the adept. She was too young.

“Mother Assumpta,” said Nenneke. “It’s Geralt…”
“I see. Flavia, Ailidh, Zdravka, I thank you. You too, Nenneke. Sit down, Geralt.”
Outside the window, magpies were squawking terribly in the garden. They must have seen a cat somewhere.
“Your face has changed,” the priestess finally said. “And your eyes, regardless of your mutation. You’ve never twisted your lips like that before. You don’t have to say anything. I see it and I know it.”
“Apparently…” he cleared his throat. “Apparently they want to throw you out of here, mother. And apparently it’s our fault.”
“Who told you that? Nenneke? No, Geralt. None of you, the youngsters we educated here, are to blame, and we hold no grudge against any of the witchers. And the fact that ignorance and backwardness are flourishing, that philistinism is spreading, is our fault, too. We taught badly. We brought them up badly. After all, it’s our former pupils who are now driving us away from here. By the law they themselves had established.”
“The people at the gate were talking… They were talking about driving women away from the temple. They were talking about…”
“I know what they were talking about. Also about the law. The law that medical assistance provided to women is against the law and is punishable. Men came up with it, of course. Ha, if they were the ones who got pregnant, the termination procedure would be declared a holy mystery and would take place with prayers, incense and choral singing.”
“What a world,” Assumpta of Rivia continued after a moment. “They mock our goddess, they ridicule our prayers. As if it were superstition. And in the west and north, in the wastelands, some cults, some sects are multiplying. Spiders, snakes, dragons and other monsters are worshipped. People whisper about crimes, about human sacrifices. And somehow no one is trying to fight it. Nor is anyone trying to drive out the cult followers.”
“We’re moving south, beyond the Pontar,” she anticipated the question. “To Temeria, to Ellander, to be precise. There’s an abandoned temple there, the local ruler graciously allows us to move in there. Naturally, we will also provide assistance there to women who need it, regardless of whether someone likes it or not. But too much about our affairs. Tell me, how are you?”
He told her. But only about his witcher missions. He did not mention the marauder who had been hacked to death near the village of Neuhold. Or the ravens at the crossroads, or what happenened next. Mother Assumpta listened patiently. And she summed it up, briefly and accurately.
“I feel and know what you need.”
“You know?”
“Sure. Because I can’t help you except with my knowledge. What do you want to know, my boy? Forgive me. Witcher Geralt.”
He was silent for a long time.

“What really happened in Kaer Morhen? In the year one thousand one hundred and ninety-four?”
“Why are you asking me that?” she raised her head. “You, who from early childhood had been watching the bones in the moat? And the names of the seven witchers who died heroically carved in the wall? You, who was raised on heroic tales?”
“I’m talking about those tales. They are so heroic that…”
“Too heroic for you? That’s how they should be, my boy. Heroes are supposed to be heroes. And tales are supposed to describe them in that way. And you shouldn’t doubt either. But you can’t change the fact that time inexorably blurs everything, heroism too. And tales and legends are designed to prevent that, even at the cost of so-called objective truth. Because truth isn’t for everyone. Truth is for those who can bear it. Can you? Don’t grimace. You can’t. If you could, you would’ve asked Vesemir to tell you the truth. Or your elders. And you’re asking me.”
“Because you’ve never lied to me.”
“Are you so sure? What if I can lie so well that no one will recognise my lie? Either a boy, or a grown-up eighteen-year-old young man? You’re not telling me everything, young man.”
This time he told her everything. He couldn’t help stuttering.
“So that’s where the shoe pinches,” said Assumpta of Rivia. “Preston Holt.”
Silence reigned for a long time. The magpies outside the window fell silent.
“One day in the spring of the year one hundred and ninety-two,” the priestess put her hand to her forehead, “a lampoon appeared, *Monstrum or the description of a witcher*. Anonymous, as usual, but in print, and in those days printing houses could be counted on the fingers of one hand, so there weren’t too many suspects. Many things pointed to sorcerers from Ban Ard Academy who had a printing house, but there was no evidence, and no wonder, because it’s hard to find experts in covering up traces who were equal to sorcerers.”
“The anonymous lampoon circulated widely, in numerous copies, and wandering emissaries read this work of questionable quality to illiterates at village meetings and gatherings. And the news began to circulate through the marches and spread like wildfire. Plagues, diseases and infirmities, cattle plagues, miscarriages and stillbirths among women, crop failures and bumper crops, pests, all misfortunes and misery were the fault of the infamous witchers, the spider’s threads of all crimes and conspiracies led to Kaer Morhen. That’s why Kaer Morhen, I quote, “the witchers’ nest”, must be wiped off the face of the earth, and every trace of it sprinkled with salt and saltpeter. In the summer of the year one hundred and ninety-four someone finally managed to gather and organise a mob, an army set off into the mountains, about a hundred armed people. Less than a third returned, and in panic. The rest had rotted away in the moat of your castle, their bones lie there to this day.”

“You may ask, how on earth did a few witchers defeat a hundred fanatics? I’ll tell you. As you know, the most apt and best-trained sorcerers can work as a team, they can join forces to cast spells, with a greatly multiplied effect. Witchers can’t do that. Your Witcher Signs are a very individual thing, they work only with a specific person. But then, in Kaer Morhen, when the mob forced the ramparts and the castle grounds were on fire, the last four surviving witchers joined their hands and forces. And cast the Sign together. With deadly effect, striking en masse. Unfortunately, they didn’t survive it themselves either.”
“But the effect had been achieved. Although Kaer Morhen, deprived of defenders, was at the mercy of the surviving attackers, they didn’t dare to break into the Keep and fled in panic.”
“The news of the attack spread. The young king Eoin, who ruled Kaedwen at the time, a quite enlightened man, became slightly upset, and the margraves were not thrilled either. The latter did not like witchers at all, but they did not intend to tolerate bottom-up initiatives and the willfulness of the insolent rabble. The rabble needed to be taught a lesson. Two men were beheaded on the scaffold in Ard Carraigh, four men were publicly hanged in their home villages. Unfortunately, all six of them were the least guilty. The leaders and instigators had not been brought to justice. At least not immediately.”
“And now it is time for your desired objective truth, Geralt. There are seven names carved on the wall of Kaer Morhen. The heroic tale speaks of the seven fallen. But at that time there were eight witchers in Kaer Morhen.”
“When word got out about the attack, we went to Kaer Morhen, me and a few adepts. We were there long before Byrnjolf and Vesemir and the young ones showed up. We found dead bodies. Lots of dead bodies. And one was alive. Barely alive.”
“That was Holt.”
“He didn’t go by that name then. Back then his name was Reyndert. And they called him Reyndert the Ghost. Now listen. We didn’t find Reyndert in the castle, but at some distance away from it.”
“Reyndert himself later claimed that he didn’t remember anything. But he was talking nonsense in his fever. And I… Maybe I acted rashly and imprudently, but I was… Well, a bit younger then than I am today… Emotions took over. I blurted out what Reyndert had said in his delirium to Vesemir.”
She was silent for a long time. Geralt didn’t rush her.
“As it turned out,” she continued, “that Reyndert wasn’t wounded in defense of Kaer Morhen, but during his escape.”
Geralt was silent.
“Time has passed. Time changes everything. The so-called objective truth vanished in the mist. Vesemir persists in his stubbornness, I… I try not to persist. I want to forgive… No, not forgive. Forget. Reyndert — now Preston Holt, because he returned to his real name — has been saving people in Kaedwen from monsters for years, undoing curses and spells. He visits the

temple. We often refilled his elixirs, and healed his wounds several times. I healed mine at the same time. Even the more painful ones. The ones that memories inflict."
"But enough about that." She lifted her head up abruptly. "I told you enough. Maybe too much, it remains to be seen. Now take my advice. I don't like this idea of you working for Holt as an apprentice."
"I'm not his employee. I act on the basis of good will and mutual trust. I am his perpro…"
"Per procura. That means "acting by proxy."
"I know."
"And do you also know that you should winter in Kaer Morhen, not with Holt in Rocamora? Or that it's very bad for you to be associated with Holt?"
"Why?"
"Holt…" The priestess put her hand to her forehead. "Holt is not the right mentor for you. You should seek your own path. Literally and figuratively. Promise me that you'll leave Rocamora. And Holt."
Geralt was silent. Assumpta of Rivia looked at him searchingly. Finally, she sighed deeply.
"You came here, Geralt, for information and advice, don't deny it. You got both. What you do with it is up to you. We taught you what we could, that's it, education is complete. Now, when you make a mistake or cause trouble, when you listen to the wrong advice, Nenneke won't make you stand in the corner. Life will put you there."
They sat in silence for a long time.
"Where are you heading now?"
"To…" he stuttered, but decided not to dodge the question. "To Spynham. Then to the northeast, to the edge of the march. The settlers need help."
"It's true. For you are a witcher."
The magpies in the garden continued to squawk.
"Mother Assumpta?"
"Yes?"
"Someone recently accused me of the name Geralt being… mundane."
"And what of it? It's your name."
"Well, yes, but… Maybe I should add something? Some kind of "of", like in yours? Some nobiliary article?"
"It's called a nobiliary particle. But you're no nobleman at all, Geralt. Why should you pretend to be someone else?

****

Zoë, Fervida and Hippolyta, the girls from the "Lorelei", had nothing to do. It was morning and a weekday. So they were passing the time according to their interests. Zoë was knitting a beret for her daughter. Fervida was reading a manual on growing potted herbs. Hippolyta was staring out the window, watching the swallows flying around the tower of Spynham town hall.

They all heard the creaking of the stairs, but none of them reacted. The sight of Pampinea Monteforte entering the room did not shock any of them either.
"I have a job for you," Pampinea declared. Her breasts were heaving picturesquely. "We have a guest. But I warn you: this must be kept a secret."
"Is it Mister Mayor again?" Zoë snorted. And Hippolyta raised her eyes to the ceiling.
"No," Pampinea retorted. "This time it's not Mister Mayor. He's an even more secret guest. That's why I'm coming to you, whom I've known for a long time. And whom I trust. Because these young ones, well, I don't suspect them of being informers, but they're silly, they might just blab it out…"
"Who is it then? Tell us, Our Madam. Or we'll die of curiosity."
"A witcher."
"Mr. Holt?" Fervida giggled. "Has he gotten younger after all?"
"No, no," Pampinea shook her finger at Fervida. "No such jokes! Mr. Holt is a respected client. But it's not him. This one is a young witcher. Quite young, I'd say. And handsome. To a certain extent. Who isn't afraid and willing to take him?"
"And the one who takes him," asked Zoë after a moment of silence, "what will she get out of it?"
Pampinea Monteforte did not hesitate for long.
"She can keep three quarters of the fee for herself," she decided.
The girls looked at each other. And at their Madam.
"Well," said Hippolyta with a smile, "I suggest we draw straws. Who has the shortest one wins the witcher."
"What about," Fervida smiled too, "shortening two straws?"
"As for me," said Zoë, "I don't think we'll need these straws at all."

****

To Dear Mr Preston Holt
Districtus Ban Fillim
Oppidum Rocamora
Datum ex urbe Belvoir, die 6 mens Augusti anno 1229 post Resurectionem

Dear Mr Preston, *salve*,
in accordance with the spirit of our agreement, I hereby inform you that from the day of young Mr. Geralt's visit to me until the day of sending this letter, sums have been transferred to my account from various banks for a total amount of 4,885 Kaedweni marks, amount in words: four thousand eight hundred eighty-five 00/100.
I am transferring the correct amount after deducting my commission and paying the tax to your regular account.
It has undoubtedly attracted your attention, dear Preston, that from an approximate calculation it ensues that since he visited me in May, the young witcher must have exterminated quite a few monsters. That means either he

killed a lot of them, or he killed fewer, but he bargained effectively — actually, both of those things speak in his favour. Congratulations on your choice, your *per procura* will go far. Although the young witcher probably doesn't know what that word means, it turns out once again that it is more important to do a good job than to know its learned name.
With his actions, as it is shown in bank transfers, the young witcher took over part of the Western March and the Upper March. He visited, as I know, the temple of the goddess Melitele in Elsborg. Interestingly, he dropped in on the "Lorelei" in Spynham right after and spent some time there. But what of it, youth has its rights, and what he spends his *per diem* on is his own business. As long as he doesn't save money on food too much, or he will get debilitated.
The only thing that worries me is that a lot of sleuths are hanging around the youngster. Dear Preston, I have reasons to suspect that it is not the youngster they are interested in, but you. Increase caution.
Saluto te,
Timur Voronoff

Let your fields perish from cowbane and thistle; let your fallow harvest blackthorn, let it be poisoned with fool's parsley! You will know no joy, this curse will consume your heart, the very depths of your soul! It will grind you into rotten wood, into rusty, stale, rotten canker!
Stefan Grabiński

CHAPTER NINE

The first thing Geralt saw when he entered the town through the turnstile gate was a hanged man. A young, blond-haired girl in torn clothes, to be exact. She was hanging from the well pole, swaying and turning in the wind. As he passed, he recognised the details — a swollen face, an unnaturally stretched neck, bruises on her thighs, feet black with dried blood.

The little town was empty, as if it were dead, not a soul in the street, not even a dog jumped out from behind a fence to bark up the horse's hind legs. The closed shutters and gates frightened with hostility. They were a harbinger of bad things that had already happened here. And even worse things that were yet to happen.

When Geralt got closer to the market square, he noticed a few people, and they noticed him.

"A witcher, aren't you?" a young man in a beret with a pheasant feather ran up and tried to catch his breath. "Yes, I see, you are a witcher. Have you gotten our message then? Our appeal for help? You have come to help us, right?"

"I've met the messenger. He was galloping around the entire area with the appeal. With the news that a witcher is urgently needed in the town of Glass Mountain. So here I am, to answer the appeal. Because this is Glass Mountain, isn't it?"

"It is. Oh, it's great, it's great that you are here… Because a misfortune has befallen us here… A terrible misfortune… But let us go to the market square, you will see for yourself. This way, this way, please…"

"So, a witcher?" A tall, grey-bearded gentleman emerged from the group of people at the gates of the market square. The buttons on his jacket were as big as ducats. And they were golden too. Or rather gilded.

"So, you know how to undo curses? Well, we'll see, we'll see. Get off your horse, come here. Closer, closer."

There were about a dozen people at the gate, they retreated in fear from the approaching witcher, turning their heads away.

"This way." The grey-bearded one pointed the way. "Follow me."

They entered a yard, then went up the creaking stairs to a cloister. Here the grey-bearded man stopped and covered his nose with his sleeve.

"There, behind the door," he said indistinctly from behind his sleeve, pointing the way.

Then he ran away, almost falling down the stairs.

The witcher could already smell the nasty, nauseating smell of something rotten from a distance, so he was not surprised to see a doctor in the hallway. His profession was unmistakably betrayed by the leather cap with a long bird's beak and glass eyes.

When the doctor saw him, he said something completely indistinctly from behind the bird mask. When he understood that, he went out to the cloister, calling Geralt after him. In the cloister he took off his hat and wiped his

sweaty face. He was very young.
“Medicine is useless there,” he sighed, waving his hand. “It’s no use sprinkling the place with vinegar, what’s the point of disinfecting with sulfur there. There’s black magic at work. A curse, no doubt.”
“Can you elaborate?”
“Yes, I can.” The doctor narrowed his eyes. “I’ll try my best. I’ll elaborate the reason of the threat. There, in the room, are our mayor, his spouse, and three children, one of whom is in the cradle. Three days ago they were infected with black magic in a truly terrible way. Some kind of slime, something like living tar, is crawling over their bodies. The infection is progressing and slowly killing them. Maybe it has already killed… You are a witcher, I see. But what are you going to do there? What will you do with your swords?”
“I’ll tell you when I see it.”
“Really? Do you want to enter the room?”
“Yes.”
The doctor bridled up, waved his hands, as if in protest, then changed his mind.
“Come on,” he mumbled from under the mask, which he put on again. “This way.”
The room was dark, the stench of rot was suffocating, stinging the eyes. Geralt could hear the quiet crying of children, the monotonous wailing of a woman.
Geralt’s medallion began to vibrate strongly.
He almost fell into the cradle, it stood in his way. Inside lay the corpse of a child, all covered with a black, rough coating, some already dried slime. He looked like a black doll.
The mayor — for it had to be him — was sitting in an armchair with a backrest. Half of his body, from feet to waist, was covered with the same black slime. The slime, it seemed, was moving. Geralt came closer. Indeed, the slime was pulsating and quivering, sticking out some moving protrusions.
The woman was lying further away, in the corner, hugging two crying children. She was also sobbing. Both she and the children were covered with that black coating.
Ignoring the doctor’s premonitory buzzing, Geralt came even closer. He knelt down next to the mayor.
“Save them,” the mayor gasped, holding out his hands. Geralt stepped back cautiously. “Save them… The children…”
As if having heard or reacted to the movement, the black slime came to life, pulsated and grew, covering the mayor by a few more inches. The mayor moaned loudly. The woman in the corner howled, the children began to scream.
Geralt drew his dagger, gathered a drop of the slime on the tip of the blade. He stood up, stepped back. They left together with the doctor.
“You saw it.”

The doctor stated the fact, took off his mask and wiped his face. “You saw it with your own eyes. It’s supernatural power, black magic, or worse, some demonic force, or something like that… And did you see my walking stick and gloves on the floor? I had to take them off, throw them, because the slime transferred to them, grew and kept growing, I barely had time… What else is to say… Look at your dagger.”
A drop of slime gathered on the very tip of the dagger now covered almost an inch of the blade. The slime was alive, it was bulging, sprouting winding growths.
“If it completely covers and strangles those people,” the medic said gloomily, “it can move on to look for new victims.”
“No.” The witcher shook his head. “It really does look like a curse or a spell. It was cast only on those present here. The spell will kill them and expire.”
“But it will kill them, you say. It means that there is no salvation for the mayor and his loved ones. Well, I would advise burning down the house.”
They both went down to the yard.
There was a commotion at the gate. And the girl hanged there, tied up on a rope with a broken nose. She looked to be less than fifteen years old.
“A curse,” harangued one of the townspeople, holding the girl on a rope, “is known to be broken only by the death of the one who cast the curse. It was our mistake to hang that girl, because she is hanging, but the curse is still here. But since that girl was a healer and a herbalist, it’s no big deal, there’s nothing to cry about. Now we have another relative of that healer, she is undoubtedly guilty, because who it can be, if not her. Let’s hang her then! You will see, her death will lift the curse.”
“And what if it won’t? What if we hang another innocent woman?”
“We have to burn the house,” interfered the doctor. “Burn it down. That is the only way out.”
“The hell it is! The buildings are close-set, half the city will go up in smoke!”
“So what should we do?”
“The witcher is here,” the grey-bearded one shouted. “That is why we sent a messenger, right? To fetch a witcher, right? Well, now we have a witcher! He understands sorcery! Let us hear him out…”
“Witcher,” interrupted a thin youngish man dressed in a black robe.
“Methinks, you are still wet behind the ears, aren’t you?”
Geralt did not consider it necessary to answer.
The man in the black robe approached Geralt, very close. He wore some holy symbol hanging on a chain around his neck.
“We don’t need a novice witcher here!” He reeked terribly of alcohol, both digested and fresh. “We need to pray!”
“You have been praying since morning, honourable priest,” said the grey-bearded man angrily, “and you have achieved nothing. Mister Witcher, what will you say? Will you commit yourself to helping?”
“Helping?” the priest said and Geralt smelled vodka on his breath again.

“Him? I wonder how. And in truth, I don’t care, because why should I wonder. A prayer. Only a prayer, I tell you, will help us. And firstly, we have to hang the girl!”
The grey-bearded man, a councilman of evidently senior rank, whispered with the others.
“We are hiring you, young witcher,” he finally said. “We, I mean, the local authorities. For three hundred marks. But you’ll get them only when you succeed. That is, when that problem is dealt with.”
“That’s clear. I accept the contract.”
“If you need some help, we will help, we will give you anything you want, we will not refuse you anything. Just tell me what do you need?”
The witcher pointed to the girl.
“Her.”

****

He didn’t have to look far or long, the elixir called Wagtail, which was useful in such cases, helped him. And observing a bit of the slime on the blade of the dagger.
“There, by the stream,” Geralt asked the girl who was still following him.
“Whose homestead is this? Speak louder, I can barely hear you.”
“A dyer lived there… Once…”
“Thank you. Now run home. And don’t let them catch you again!”
The hut stood on the very edge, the poorer edge of the town, among alders by the stream. If it was the dyer’s house, she must have lived there a long time ago. There were no tufts of wool and yarn drying, and streaks of pigment had dried and faded on the rows of long-unused vessels on the porch.
He entered. The door creaked. In the hallway, a cobweb settled on his face, it seemed that few guests had been using this way lately. There were pots, kettles and a lot of other dyeing utensils. The place smelled of vinegar.
The room was bright and astonishingly tidy.
A woman was sitting in a wicker-backed rocking chair. She was about forty years old. He could be mistaken.
They looked at each other in silence for a moment.
“You have death written on your face,” the woman said. “I had no illusions,” she continued, not ceasing her slow rocking. “I knew someone like you would show up. The town oafs could have tracked me down after all… Maybe it’s better that it’s someone like you.”
He didn’t answer.
“The mayor,” she said again, after a long moment, “killed my son. He ran him over with his horse when he was drunk. And then he intimidated me, forced me to take his money. I took it, so he thought it was over, that it was the end of it. I waited for a long time. Finally, I got the knowledge and the way to pay back, and it wasn’t cheap. It wasn’t cheap, but it was so easy to cast… A

movement of the hand and a word… I was in despair, and it was a desperate remedy. But I didn't know that the consequences would be so terrible… And that his wife and children would suffer… Children! And that innocently hanged girl. Now I would like to take it all back, to undo it… To save them. I figured out how."
"There is only one way."
"I knew it," she nodded. "I knew that only my death… But I didn't want to fall into their hands, let myself be tortured and hanged… I wanted to lay hands on myself. I bought poison, as you see. But I was afraid to take it… Maybe now I will dare, when you are here…"
"It doesn't work like that."
"Ah, so a sword it is. The one you have on your back."
He was silent, there was no point in confirming. She was silent too.
"Will you strike," she said finally, "quickly, with one blow? So that I wouldn't feel…"
"It doesn't work like that."
"Ah," she gulped. "Well… If that's what it takes… If it saves the children…"
"It'll save two of them. The older ones. It's too late for the youngest one."
She sighed loudly. He saw a tear on her cheek.
He drew his sword. She shuddered.
"Disrobe. Just slide your shirt off your shoulders."
"Should I stand up?"
"No."
He rested his foot on the armchair's rocker, stopped the rocking. He grabbed the woman's arm tightly, dug his fingers in. He placed the blade of the sword against the centre of her chest, at the height of the fifth rib.
"I wish I could…"
He didn't let her finish.
He pushed hard, he felt the blade smoothly pierce the breastbone. The dyer screamed, jerked, but it was too late. Clutching her fingers on her shoulder, he leant down and pushed, hard, the blade went through with a crunch, the thin wicker back of the chair was also pierced through. He pressed on the sword even harder, with force, until the entire blade went through her back, up to the hilt. The woman stopped screaming, she only gasped. Blood already appeared in her mouth.
But that was not the end of the ritual.
Geralt hunched over, pulled the blade up hard, shattering the breastbone and the upper costal cartilages. Blood gushed from the woman's mouth, he knew that the blade had cut the pericardium and the aorta.
He pressed on the hilt and pulled the blade down hard, slicing the lower costal cartilages. Arteries. Veins. The heart chambers.
The dyer gave a sigh. Her eyes were still open.
But that was not the end of the ritual.
He turned the blade. He slashed horizontally, shattering her ribs. First to the

right, then to the left. The heart chambers and arteries turned into a formless mash. That was the end of the ritual.
He pulled out the blade slowly and carefully, it slid out smoothly. The woman remained in the armchair. Motionless.
If it weren't for the blood, one might have thought she was asleep.

****

In the market square the young man in the beret with the pheasant feather ran up to him, he was out of breath.
"The curse," Geralt said before the young man stopped panting, "should have stopped working by now. At last. You can see for yourselves…"
"It's over!" the young man interrupted him. "It's retreating, it's withdrawing! The mayor and the mayor's wife only have black feet now, the tar has completely come off the kids…"
"I'm glad to hear it. It's time to fulfill your end of the bargain, right? What about my payment?"
The young man fell silent, cleared his throat, and blushed in an absolutely unambiguous way. Geralt sighed.
"You see, sir witcher," the young man confirmed his suspicions with a trembling voice. "When you went somewhere and disappeared, the priest was there the whole time, performing exorcisms and praying… Then the councilmen ruled that the agreement was invalid. That it wasn't your merit, but the priest's, that the curse was lifted… In a word…"
"In a word, you will not pay me anything."
"Well," the young man stammered. "Somehow, you see, it has been decided… That's the decision. But it doesn't mean that we'll pay you nothing, not at all. The councilmen have decided that we can pay you… five marks. That is just for your arrival…"
Geralt had it on the tip of his tongue that the noble councilmen could stick those five marks up their arses. But he changed his mind. Five marks would be enough for a dinner at a crossroads tavern. And he was hungry.
He remembered the woman's eyes at the moment when his blade tore through her aorta. Suddenly he lost his appetite.
But he had to eat, he thought, jumping onto Roach's saddle and setting off for the tollgates.

There's also sciendum about witchers that those wicked men received perfect knowledge of herbs and other substances from the devil. Having stolen the knowledge of certain decoctions from the sages, and mixing poisons and deadly essences on their bases, they created alkahests and potions of terrible power, capable not only of confusing the mind, but also of completely changing human nature. Having such alkahests at hand, the witchers began to kidnap children, especially such infants, who were not carried to the temple by their foolish and careless parents soon after birth, therefore evil

spells had access to them. As it was discovered, the witchers forcibly applied their hideous decoction to these kidnapped children, thereby in those few children who had survived the horrors of such treatment, everything human was destroyed, and everything villainous and evil seemed to develop more quickly. In this way, unable to reproduce themselves in naturalibus, the witchers began to multiply in a devilish way.
Anonymous, Monstrum or the description of a witcher

CHAPTER TEN

Geralt wished he could forget as soon as possible the events in the town of Glass Mountain, once known for the crafting of glass from the quartz sands found there. Unfortunately, he could not. The news spread widely, astonishingly fast and impressively far. It was primarily a pious priest who was praised for lifting the curse, yet, oddly enough, rumours painted a young witcher as the hero of the tale. The wayside oaks and posts at the crossroads were suddenly decorated with message boards. The messages, varying greatly in their orthography, desperately called for help. “A witcher’s assistance is urgently needed, a curse, a spell, or an evil enchanment has to be lifted” — the messages read.

Still brimming with youthful fervour, at first Geralt didn’t ingore any call for help, he rushed to help with enthusiasm. His exthusiasm waned slowly as he had to explain to one family that their ninety-year-old grandfather, whose age has to be commended, suffered from senile decay resulting in intellectual decline, and that it was not, as they claimed, a curse cast by a spiteful neighbour. In another village, he had to examine the village head’s genitals and had to come to a conclusion that it was not a curse but an advanced case of the clap, requiring a medic rather than a witcher. In three other settlements, he informed men suffering from either temporary or permanent erectile dysfunction that, as a witcher, he could not solve their problem. Usually, when he declined to help, they accused him of wanting to extort more money and cursed him up hill and down. Several times, he was approached by common swindlers — individuals of various ages and genders feigning possession, while a neighbour, relative, or spouse was accused of casting the spell, hoping the witcher would kill the accused on the spot. Each time he refused, they accused him of deceit or conspiracy, he was scolded and driven away.

By late September, after covering thirty or so miles, Geralt began to treat the messages nailed to the posts rather selectively. He reacted only to those without spelling errors, which were very, very rare. Nevertheless, he had not encountered a genuine and removable curse even once.

He also declined to kill a bear, a task proposed by some forest beekeepers. The bear had been destroying their hives and devouring their honey. Geralt quickly shielded himself with an improvised witcher’s code, although in truth, he had no desire to confront the beast, as it was big as a barndoor and, as it turned out, had already claimed several hunters.

About a week after the equinox, as he approached a crooked post at a crossroads, his gaze was caught by a plank of light birch wood. The inscription on the plank was burnt — he rarely encountered such messages, usually they were scrawled in charcoal. This inscription was surprisingly enigmatic:

A WITCHER NEEDED TO LIFT A CURSE

A burnt arrow pointed the way. Into the woods, along the forest path. Approximately to the south.

****

Something was wrong. The village, as he quickly realised, was deserted for quite some time. The thatched roofs caved in, broken windows yawned like black holes, and torn door wings hung mournfully from their frames. The little farms and plots were overgrown with lush weeds. Broken fences grinned with missing teeth through the weeds.

There was no indication that a witcher was needed there. Not even a trace of someone who could need him.

The sandy road, interestingly enough, was marked with numerous and fresh hoofprints.

A more experienced witcher would have turned back immediately and hurried away. Geralt compensated for his lack of experience with courage. Its origin was not only inexperience but also a lack of imagination. He nudged Roach with his heel and set off toward the well. The well was also heavily overgrown with moss and nettles, but the well pole appeared intact, and there was a trough nearby.

He had barely approached the well when, as if from under the earth, or rather from behind the huts, four henchmen suddenly emerged. They were dressed similarly, almost uniformly, in yellow-and-black kaftans. It was reassuring that they were not ordinary robbers. It was not reassuring, however, that all four of them were armed with crossbows. Drawn and aimed at Geralt.

“Get off your horse. And put your swords on the ground.”

It did not seem like there was room for discussion.

“Move ahead. To the barn.”

The barn was bright, for the roof was, in fact, one giant hole. The remnants of the roof hung from the ridge and rafters, threatening to collapse at any moment. Much of what had already collapsed lay around on the earthen floor.

There was a gentleman in the barn, he was sitting on the beam of a dilapidated grain bin, picking his teeth with a straw, ignoring the danger of his position.

“Are you the witcher known as Geralt?”

“It is I.”

The gentleman made a swift gesture. The henchmen with crossbows left the barn. Nevertheless, Geralt had no doubts that they did not go too far away.

“I am Estevan Trillo da Cunha. The prefect of the guard from Ard Carraigh. I am responsible for the safety of the kingdom of Kaedwen. Show me your witcher’s emblem.”

Geralt unbuttoned his coat, took out the chain and medallion with a snarling wolf on it.

“Thank you. And here is my emblem and proof of my identity.”
The gentleman pulled out a round, enameled plaque from beneath his cloak and showed it to Geralt. The plaque bore a black rearing unicorn on a yellow background.
Estevan Trillo da Cunha was slim, even thin. His black hair was swept back and braided into a topknot, he had a black moustache and a pointed black beard. His clothes were also entirely black and quite rich.
“Now let’s get down to business,” he said, drilling Geralt with his black eyes. “It seems that you, witcher Geralt, pose a threat to the kingdom of Kaedwen. You are charged with two murders. In March, in the settlement of Neuhold, you killed a soldier. In August, in Glass Mountain, you killed a woman.
“I killed a marauder defending innocent people and it was self-defence. There are witnesses…”
Estevan Trillo da Cunha interrupted him with a raised ringed hand.
“I would not place hope in that. Witnesses come and go. And testimonies often change. Depending on the need.”
“As for the woman, she cast a spell, it killed a child and threatened several people with death. Only her death could break the curse. This was witcher’s work…”
“I have other information and verified proofs.”
“After all, in accordance with the imperial edit issued by King Dagread, witchers are exempt from local jurisdiction…”
“The edict pertains to witchers killing monsters. Monsters. Not humans. I will have to arrest you, witcher Geralt.”
Geralt remained silent for a while. It looked as if Estevan Trillo da Cunha was smirking beneath his black moustache.
“The message on a board at the crossroads,” he said slowly. “With a fake report of a curse. An abandoned place. An ambush. An arrest, but more of an unofficial nature. No witnesses. Is that how the security service of the kingdom of Kaedwen operates? This medallion with a unicorn, sir prefect of the guard, isn’t it also a fake?”
Estevan Trillo da Cunha also fell silent, for a time. He ceased to smile.
“You wear the witcher’s emblem and act as a witcher,” he finally said. “Ostensibly on your own account, but in reality, you serve someone else.”
“I do not serve anyone. I act per procura, which means…”
“You are an accomplice to a criminal,” the prefect interrupted sharply. “Preston Holt, whom you serve, is a criminal. He premeditatedly assassinated three people. I know it, but that is not enough. I want to put him on trial, and for that trial, I need irrefutable evidence. And you shall provide me with that evidence.”
“How do you mean?”
“You will find evidence of Holt’s guilt and deliver it to me. In that case, you yourself will escape trial, conviction, and punishment. And you should know that the penalty for double murder would be a garrotte in Sturefors prison.

Geralt shrugged and turned away.
“Three people,” the prefect continued. “were murdered in an extraordinarily cruel manner, and in such a way that nothing indicated a witcher was involved. That is, definitely not by a sword.”
“You don’t say.”
“Kari Nourred, a cripple who couldn’t walk without crutches, was hanged by his own long underwear. Otto Margulies, a distinguished social activist and philanthropist, was hacked to death with a meat cleaver. Remko Chwalba, a father of three and grandfather of six children, was bludgeoned to death with a cobbler’s hammer.
“And each time,” Geralt smirked, “the witnesses pointed to Holt?”
“Each time they pointed to someone else with a completely different appearance. By the way, do you know where Holt’s estate got its name, Rocamora?”
“No.”
“Roac a moreah. In Elder Speech it means: revenge, family vendetta.”
“Well, that is irrefutable evidence.” Geralt smirked again. “But what did those three do to deserve Holt’s wrath? What if Holt just randomly kills people? Just like a witcher should? Everything can be blamed on a witcher. Evidence can be concocted, witnesses bribed, and everyone will believe it, because all evil follows a witcher, along with unpleasant miasmas, and everything he touches must be burned. He must be guilty of everything, including murder. Especially if the real criminals cannot be found, and someone has to prove himself worthy…”
“Those three murdered,” Estevan Trillo da Cunha calmly explained, “led a mob that attacked Kaer Morhen, your Witchers’ Keep, in the year nineteen ninety-four. That is precisely why, young man, I do not believe that different random criminals could be blamed for these atrocities. I know who is truly to blame and what motive he had.”
“Well, finally it makes sense,” Geralt said slowly. “We are talking about the year nineteen ninety-four. You know what, prefect? If all this is true, then those three got what they deserved, I would gladly have killed them myself, I have a damn good motive to do so, it is a pity someone beat me to it. If I happened to encounter that person, I would congratulate and thank him. And I would treat him to a beer.”
“You will not have that opportunity.” The prefect rose from the grain bin. “Because you will be sitting in a cell in Sturefors awaiting trial. Unless you agree…”
“I won’t.”
“Do you know why we are talking in this abandoned place without witnesses? Because if you agree to provide me with the evidence I seek, if you even promise me to look for it, then you will leave this place free as a bird, and no one will learn of our conversation. But if I arrest you officially, the machinery of justice will be set in motion, and it will drag you into its

cogwheels, and there is no way out of it except onto the scaffold."
"No deal."
Estevan Trillo da Cunha stood up quickly and stepped closer to Geralt. Geralt, who had already been playing with his key in his pocket for some time, contemplated what would be a better target — the bregma, or the bridge of the nose and that glabella which gives off such a nice sound?
One of the crossbowmen burst into the barn, panting and sweaty, gesticulating wildly. The prefect shot Geralt one last look and went out.
Geralt was left alone. The back door of the barn was ajar, no one was guarding it, and it would not be difficult to slip out that way and disappear into the nearby thicket. However, the witcher couldn't leave either Roach or his swords as loot for the prefect. Come what may, he decided, settling onto the grain bin. I will wait.
He waited. He heard some voices, hooves clattering, snorts and neighs of horses outside. After a while there was complete silence. Yet he seemed to hear the horses snorting and the squeaking of the well pole.
When he finally ventured to go out, dying from curiosity and squinting his eyes from the sun, he was greatly surprised. Five riders were waiting in the yard. All were dressed in red-and-black kaftans. There was no trace of the yellow-and-black soldiers or the prefect from Ard Carraigh.
A tall blonde woman in a men's elkskin jerkin and high boots stood by the well. She was pouring water from the well into a trough. Roach bent over the trough and was drinking.
He approached more closely. The woman had poison-green, almond-shaped eyes. Her open jerkin revealed a white hemstitched shirt. A long cutlass on a pendant with silver thread embroidery hung at her side.
The woman pointed to the swords leaning against the well with her gloved hand.
"Your property, I presume?"
He nodded.
"I am Elena Fiachra de Mersault, commandant of the Upper March guard service."
Geralt should have said something witty, like it seemed to be a guard season, or a whole bag of services had somehow parted at the seams. He said nothing. He simply lost his tongue in his mouth.
The woman understood the situation and did not continue.
"The horse has had its drink," she said shortly after. "So, we can set off."
"I won't…" Geralt regained the gift of speech. "I won't provide evidence."
"That's a good thing because I do not care. Get on the horse, please."
"So I am not arrested?"
"Do you want to be?"
"No."
"Then get in the saddle. I am getting bored with this conversation."
"But first I'd first like to…"

“Sir Margrave Luitpold Lindenbrog,” Elena Fiachra de Mersault interrupted, “wishes that you, witcher, appear for an audience at his place, at the castle of Brunanburh. Margrave Lindenbrog has full authority here, in the Upper March. Incidentally, I have just invoked this authority, ordering Estevan Trillo da Cunha to abandon you and return to Ard Carraigh. Paying no heed either to what he holds against you or to what he wants from you. And Estevan, while he serves the king, humbly obeyed. As you see, he is no longer here. A word was enough to make him disappear. I suggest you heed the wishes of margrave Lindenbrog too. Just as humbly. I do not intend to waste more words.”
“I got it. Well, then, let’s ride.”

****

Elena Fiachra de Mersault, commandant of the Upper March guard service, looked roughly the same age as Priestess Nenneke from Elsborg, which, according to Geralt’s calculations, was somewhere around thirty. She could by no means be called unattractive, although her beauty was of a completely different kind than that of Pampinea Monteforte or the girls from the “Lorelei”. The beauty of the girls from the “Lorelei” was — Geralt searched for the right word — plush, plushen, plush-like? So soft, pleasant, and attractive. The commandant de Mersault, on the other hand, didn’t attract at all.
They travelled in absolute silence for about an hour. And there was no sign that de Mersault would speak first. Geralt had, indeed, a few questions, but he did not rush to ask them. He remembered that the commandant disliked wasting words, and he did not relish hearing that from her again.
But eventually, he could not hold back any longer.
“What does the margrave need me for?”
The commandant rode closer, so close that she nudged Geralt’s foot with her stirrup.
“You are a witcher.” Surprisingly, she did not hesitate to reply. “You are needed for witcher services.”
“Specifically?”
“It is too specifical.”
He fell silent, slowly losing patience.
From a distance, where the forest ended and the west began to light up with the sunset, Geralt heard barking dogs and the bellow of an ox.
“We will spend the night in the village.” Elena Fiachra de Mersault said. “They have to provide room and board for the margrave’s retinue. Then we will talk.”

****

The obligation to accommodate the retinue of travelling dignitaries, notables,

and lower-ranking officials, was an obligation that most often meant for a village or settlement an absolute disaster, comparable only to fire or an invasion of hostile armies. Geralt had seen peasants in the temple in Elsborg beseeching the help of the priestesses and their mediation regarding complaints they had brought to the authorities against officials who abused their right for accomodation, sometimes too much.

So it was no surprise that the village at the edge of the forest, noticeably poor, greeted commandant de Mersault and her demand with lack of enthusiasm. In fact, some women began to openly lament, and children to wail without a reason. The commandant made use of the obligation with great restraint. Indeed, she did not refuse when the village elder offered her his entire hut. However, she ordered the soldiers to spend the night in a shed and to sustain themselves on their provisions, without depleting the already scanty possessions of the community and the food and fodder supplies without which a survival through the winter could prove problematic.

She did not forget her promise. When night fell, Geralt made her company in the house of the village elder, at a crooked and roughly-hewn table, by a candle she had taken from her own saddlebags. One would not find a candle in the village, there were only lanterns. And those reeked terribly of rancid tallow.

“As one can see,” she began, staring into the flickering moustache of the candle flame, “you are a rather young witcher. So you should not be surprised when I ask to make sure. Do you possess knowledge of such a creature as the monster called striga?

“I do. A striga is a monster from the group of vampires, from the subgroup of night demons. Fetal changes can bring it to life as a result of a curse or a spell cast upon a pregnant mother…”

“When the pregnancy results from incest.”

“According to folk tales. A curse or a spell can also be cast not only on the fetus but on a person of any age. If the spell takes hold, the afflicted person will become a striga upon death.”

“Have you ever seen one?”

“I have,” he confirmed. He was not lying. But he did not add that he had seen only engravings in the Physiologus and other tomes from the witchers’ library.

“And you know how to deal with something like that?”

“I do.”

And this time he did not add that it was from the books and Vesemir’s lectures.

“It appears,” he continued, not waiting for any reaction, “that you have a striga in Brunanburh. That is the matter the margrave needs me for.”

A mouse ran into the circle of light cast by the candle. It stood up on its hind legs and looked around. It ran to the toe of Elena Fiachry de Mersault’s boot, ran it over and disappeared into the darkness.

“About a year ago, in the summer,” Elena Fiachra de Mersault gazed at the mouse impassively, “a noble lady from Ard Carraigh visited the castle of Brunanburh. Secretly and incognito. She was accompanied by her fifteen-year-old daughter. The noble lady sought asylum and protection. The margrave Lindenbrog guaranteed his old acquaintance both. After a short stay, the noble lady left the castle and the March. Where she went is known only to the margrave. But she left alone. Her daughter stayed with us.”
It seemed to Geralt that after the last words the commandant sighed slightly. But he did not interrupt her monologue.
“The daughter stayed,” she repeated. “But shortly before Midwinter, she fell ill and swiftly passed away. The margrave took it hard.”
Geralt surmised the subsequent course of events. The commandant easily guessed that he surmised the rest. So she shortened the account.
“It all began before the end of Yule. The girl began to rise from her grave as… How did you say? A monster from the group of vampires, from the subgroup of night demons? People, however, did not have trouble naming the monster by its proper name. Even though it was a huge secret, the rumours could not be stopped. That noble lady from Ard Carraigh fled the capital from her father with her daughter who… was, at the same time, her sister. And that is why the daughter became a striga. A creature with very large and very sharp teeth.”
“The striga,” Elena Fiachra de Mersault continued to gaze at the candle flame, “began to do what strigas usually do. That is, coming out of her grave at night and killing people. A lot of people.”
“The real treasure of the Upper March,” she added after a moment, “and the margrave personally, is salt. The entire Foreland, or the western slope of the Blue Mountains, especially the areas around Brunanburh, rests on enormous underground deposits of the best-quality rock salt. Currently, three shafts are already operating there, and extraction reaches several thousand hundredweights a year. The prospects are much greater. A whole mining town has sprouted near Brunanburh, and a good hundred miners live there with their families.”
“Unfortunately, the cemetery and the striga’s tomb are precisely near that town and the mine. The striga does not bother itself with long walks, and the number of victims among the miners is rising. As a result, no one wants to live or work in the margrave’s salt mine. The striga threatens the economy of the March.”
“You say that a group of miners with pickaxes could have handled any striga, right? Yet they didn’t and they have no intention to. Rumours have spread that the striga is a supernatural creature, and mortals can’t take it on. People also said that anyone bitten by a striga will become a striga himself. Some said that not even a bite is required, just a glance will suffice. And that even sight is not necessary, the curse of the striga works even at a distance, and woe to any pregnant woman in the vicinity. And to crown it all…”

She suddenly fell silent. The candle flickered, the wick puffed up, and the flame smoked.
“To crown it all, word has it that Margrave Lindenbrog is not thinking of performing… annihilation. He is still looking for a way to lift the curse and to save the girl. The margrave is looking for a way, the striga is killing, the miners are fleeing from Brunanburh, the people are rebelling. And they demand that the margrave finally do something. Specifically, that he rids himself of the prejudices and calls for the help of witchers. Whom… well, let’s just say, he does not favour.”
Geralt could nod his head, but he felt it was unnecessary.
“In Glass Mountain,” the commandant raised her head, “you lifted a curse by killing the person who cast it. Is that how it is done in the case of a striga too?”
“No. It’s completely different. And to be clear: I am not riding to Ard Carraigh to kill the girl’s father.”
“It’s good to know.”
They were silent for a while.
“I have a strange feeling,” he spoke up, “or rather a forefeeling that you are not telling me everything.”
In truth, Geralt had neither feeling nor forefeeling, and there was nothing in the conduct and speech of the commandant that could effectively indicate any lack of sincerity. It was just a shot in the dark. To his surprise, he hit the target.
Or maybe not. For Elena Fiachra de Mersault did not appear the least bit worried.
“I am not used to,” she looked him directly in the eyes over the candle flames, “confess everything on the first date. And now, go. We will depart at dawn, I need to get my sleep.”

There exist, dear margrave, irreversible phenomena in this world. Such that only transform in one direction and once transformed cannot return to their previous form. For instance: you cannot turn fish soup back into an aquarium. Or, to use simpler and more familiar to you words: an addle egg does not hatch. Even simpler and without metaphors: whoever becomes a striga, a striga shall stay for eternity. Dear Luitpold, you should have thought with your head, not your prick. Now you get what you deserved.
A fragment from a letter from the sorcerer Artamon of Asguth, Dean of the Academy of Magic in Ban Ard, to Luitpold Lindenbrog, Margrave of the Upper March.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The was a shallow valley behind Brunanburh castle, a natural saddle between two hills. The castle stood on a higher, steep hill, the ruins of a once-majestic construction lay on the lower hill, and they were still majestic. Geralt supposed that once it had been a temple. And even longer ago than that, it had been a construction of elves, which was first ravaged and then converted into a temple. After that, the latter was also ravaged.

The valley, besides some misshapen willows, was surrounded by a dense thicket of intertwined shrubs. A forest of gravestones, boulders of various sizes and shapes, lay in the center of the thicket. You could tell at once that the cemetery was divided into two parts: the ancient one, recalling the elvish times, and the newer, human section. The elvish part was dominated by sturdy dolmens, heavily marked by the teeth of time and overgrown with moss. The newer human section featured modern gravestones -- slender columns of various sizes, and stelas.

It was full moon. The cemetery appeared charming and magical in the moonlight.

Geralt was well instructed, he knew where to look for the proper grave. Without instructions, he would have likely found it as well, for it stood out. There was no stela, only a slab of light marble. The slab was completely smooth, without any marks or epitaphs.

Scattered skulls and bones nearby were also an unmistakable sign. The striga had dragged some of its victims closer to its crypt to feast there.

He knew what he would have to do; he remembered the lessons from Kaer Morhen well.

All theories regarding disenchanting creatures from the subgroup of night demons — and there were several theories — agreed on the fact that to remove the spell transforming the striga it has to be caught outside its crypt till third cockcrow. Of course, it was not the cocks Geralt was concerned about, nor their crows, but rather the astronomical time and the position of the sun on the horizon. However, very few people had heard of the astronomical time, and no one except astronomers could measure the position of the sun on the horizon. Therefore, cocks were the designated timekeepers, crowing three times between midnight and dawn. The first crow takes place just after midnight. The second crow heralds the approaching dawn, that is, the moment when a glow appears on the horizon. The third crow sounds at dawn, at the moment when the glow of dawn blurs out the dimmest twinkling stars in the sky.

It was just before mid-October, and he heard a distant bell sound and the first crow announcing midnight about an hour ago. Therefore, dawn was roughly four hours away. A little more, a little less.

Geralt sat on a grave at the beginning of the path leading to the miners' settlement. He took a box from his bag, pressed the latch, and slid his finger over the closures of the phials: Golden Oriole, Black Gull, Lapwing, Wagtail,

Blackbird, Heron, Nightjar, and Rosefinch.
Today, he thought, extracting a phial from the compartment, I'll definitely need Nightjar.

****

All four walls of the chamber were decorated with hunting trophies, and not just any trophies: deer antlers, among which the smallest had fourteen points; pelts and heads of six-hundred-pound boars, hides of huge wolverines, exceptionally large mouflons' horns.
A place of honour — above the fireplace, where Luitpold Lindenbrog, the margrave of the Upper March, warmed his legs — was occupied by the antlers of a huge moose, spanning a good eighty inches.
The margrave silently observed Geralt, playing with a large silver goblet decorated with something like bone fragments. He looked like a well-kept fifty-year-old man, or maybe like a forty-year-old man who had been completely neglecting himself throughout his entire life. His purple nose and a prominent belly betrayed a fondness for drinks and delights of the table. Despite these rather epicurean traits, the margrave appeared stern and formidable. Perhaps due to his forehead laden with deep wrinkles and prematurely bald head. Perhaps due to his bushy eyebrows, ruffled like a pair of some shaggy rodents. Perhaps due to a repulsive expression in his eyes. The margrave's striking severity left no impression on Geralt. Probably due to the youthful lack of imagination.
In the corner of the chamber, beneath a large stuffed eagle, stood a loom, beside which sat two women, more precisely a woman and a girl. The girl was about twelve years old and looked just like a girl. Pretty, if it weren't for the pockmarks. The woman had long straight hair, large eyes, and narrow lips. She did not look great, perhaps due to the ghastly pallor of her face and her white delicate hands, or for something else Geralt could not determine. Both, woman and girl, were working at the loom. With quite automatic motions, they operated the device, interweaving the weft and the warp threads, the woman with her shuttle, and the girl with her batten. The result of their work looked like a net curtain or a mesh. The arrangement of threads was strange -- the pattern looked like fish scales or plates of a scale armour. Geralt noticed that the fragments of bones on the margrave's goblet included teeth and eye sockets.
"Witcher," Luitpold Lindenbrog suddenly broke the heavy silence, raising the goblet. "Do you know what this is?"
Geralt knew, but didn't utter a word.
"This goblet," the margrave continued, "was actually made from a witcher's skull. He was the leader of all witchers. This trophy comes from the memorable battle at Kaer Morhen, fought in the year nineteen ninety-four. In memory of that battle, parts of the slain witcher's skull were embedded in the goblet. This goblet was a gift to my father, the margrave of the Upper

March, from one of the participants of that victorious battle."
Geralt had no intention of revealing the true state of affairs to the margrave. The trophy was an obvious forgery. It mattered little to Geralt whether the margrave was aware of it or had been duped.
"Why am I telling you this, and why am I drinking from this goblet in your presence? I do so to make it clear to you that exactly like my father I am not fond of witchers. I consider a perverted phenomenon, unworthy of existence in nature, that mutation that brought you into the world. Even if we boldly assume that you do as much good as harm, if we assume that your good deeds even out your misdeeds and crimes, the net result is zero. Nothing. That zero outcome means that, in a word, you are utterly unnecessary to the world."
The margrave sipped from the goblet and raised his head.
"But I can summon up some tolerance when it is a question of professionalism. I also dislike, to say the least, elves and half-breeds. But I tolerate Fiachra de Mersault, a quarter-breed, hell, I honour her with a high position, for she is an outstanding professional. Therefore if I am exercising restraint and speaking with you, it is because I would like to regard you as a professional. Although you're wet behind your damn ears… Deianira! Herzeloide! Stop bugging me with your tapping! Leave! Both of you!"
The margrave's last words resonated like a moose's roar. The woman and girl cowered at the sound. They both rose and hastily left the chamber, abandoning both the loom and the scale-like net curtain.
Luitpold Lindenbrog followed both with his gaze, maintaining silence until they left. It became clear to Geralt that it was not the sound of weaving that bothered the margrave but their presence. He evidently did not want to speak while they were there.
"The maiden left in my care," he finally spoke, having swallowed from the goblet again, "suddenly passed away. And after her death, after the burial, she transformed into a striga, a devilish creature that emerges from the grave at night, kills people, and spreads terror throughout the area. Commandant de Mersault was ordered to brief you on the details, so you undoubtedly know them. Confirm."
"I confirm."
"I would also add that news spreads like wildfire, especially when someone helps it to spread. A certain priest from Glass Mountain helped, and quite a bit too. He boasted to everyone in that town that he had lifted a terrible curse from the mayor and his family with his fervent prayers. When it reached my ears, the striga had already devoured a dozen people by that time. I sent Fiachra de Mersault and ordered her to fetch that priest. And there he stood before me, just as you are now. But his calves were trembling, a pitiful sight, and I can see that yours are not. Ha, probably due to a lack of imagination."
"But back to the business. I tell the priest what the problem is, that there is a

striga and that the curse must be lifted. I described to him what a striga looked like and what it did. And I saw that he went pale as an arse in the wintertime. So I got the picture, but I asked him politely, very politely, if he was sure that his prayers truly lifted the curse in Glass Mountain and if he was willing to perform the same feat again and disenchant our striga. He lowered his eyes and mumbled something. Then he nodded his head, aye, he said, he was ready, but first he must pray to the gods all night in solitude. I graciously allowed that, but I wasn't born yesterday, so I ordered the guards to watch him secretly. And you know what? Imagine that barely dusk fell, the priest tried to sneak away. Naturally, the guards caught him by the scruff and brought him to me. I asked again, and again politely, why he intended to escape. What the matter was with his curse-lifting and whether he had intended to deceive me. He stood his ground. My politeness however had run its course. To make a long story short, he pissed me off. I ordered him to be placed in an iron cage and hung over the cliff. He did not hang there for even half an hour before he started screaming, begging for mercy. The priest confesses that it was not he who had lifted the curse in Glass Mountain and named the person who had really done it. Will you guess the name?"
Geralt nodded.
"You guessed right," the margrave feigned joy. "I am immensely pleased. So what? Will you take on the task of lifting the curse from the striga? But don't tell me you first have to pray all night because the cage still hangs in the same place."
"Is the priest still inside?"
"Hell no," grimaced Luitpold Lindenbrog. "I had freed him and sent him packing. First, for the sake of education, I ordered to whip the chap."
"Did anyone else tried to …? Maybe m'lord appealed to… Is there a resident sorcerer in your March?"
"There was. He up and died last spring. They were supposed to send me someone from Ban Ard, but to this day, they hadn't. If we are talking about Ban Ard, I sought the help of a certain powerful sorcerer, not the least in their academy, and on top of that a relative of Deianira, my wife and my late father's old friend.
I thought he would help. Who, I thought, if not him? He would wave his wand, chant a spell and break the curse. Instead of help… He wrote me a letter.
Geralt saw the margrave's expression and deduced the letter's contents, but remained silent.
"I saved the letter," the margrave forced out the words. "And if the opportunity arises, I will have that son of a bitch eat it."
"That means," Luitpold Lindenbrog stood up, " that only you're the only one left on the battleground. I will confess to you sincerely that it sickens me to have to endure you her, witcher, and ask for your help, but alas, my other options have run out. That's why, with great reluctance, I must offer you a

fair reward for a fair job. More than fair, I would say. Five hundred Novigrad crowns. That is your pay if you lift the curse and the striga transforms into the girl. You had lifted, as you have proven, the curse of the mayor of Glass Mountain. That means you know how to lift them, even though you are but a young whippersnapper. Lift the striga's curse for the sake of my satisfaction and your profit; and for fame, as I will trumpet your feat to the entire world. You will be more famous than Preston Holt himself."
"Now leave. The audience is over."

****

Geralt waited.
He endured the initial shock after taking the elixir. His sight quickly adapted to the darkness. The moon provided enough light when it peeked from behind the clouds, but the elixir caused the witcher to see as clearly as day, or even better, more sharply and with greater contrast. He could see the rats scurrying over the gravestones, previously hidden in shadows. He could hear their squeaks because his hearing had sharpened as well. From afar, he could hear the barking of dogs in the miners' settlement and the distant hooting of an owl.
Geralt waited.
First, the rats fled, scattering in all directions like grey missiles. And then he heard a sound of stones scraping against stones.
The striga sprung from its grave like a spring-released coil, leaping two good fathoms into the air. It roared, shrieked, and circled the tomb in wild bounds; leaped atop the highest stela nearby and clambered to its top, agile as a monkey. It shook its upturned backside as a monkey, screeching and howling. Then it spotted the witcher.
Once again, the striga released a ghastly shriek and sprang down from the stela. It flailed its long claws and attacked the witcher immediately. Its wide, gaping maw revealed gleaming fangs, large and sharp as daggers.
Geralt dodged, spun in a pirouette, the striga brushed past him, its fangs snapped shut, its claws sliced through the air. He took the chance and hit its temple as hard as he could with his silver-studded glove. The striga hissed, smoke rose, the creature fell to the ground, roaring wildly, shaking its head.
Now I got you, he thought. Like every striga, you are sensitive to silver, my beauty.
The striga did not rush into its next attack, shaking its head and smoking ear. This time, it approached slowly, baring its fangs, drooling disgustingly.
The moon emerged from behind the clouds for a moment, lighting up the area enough for Geralt to get a better look at the monster.
It was short, measuring roughly four feet with an disproportionately huge head, round as a pumpkin. Its big bulging eyes blazed with fire, fangs of impressive size gleamed in its wide fish-like maw.
There was a strange pattern on its skin, as if burnt in or etched with acid.

Geralt slowly advanced among the gravestones. As he moved, he encircled the striga, who was twisting in place, tense, and ready to attack. It bared its teeth and snapped its jaw.

The witcher unfurled a silver chain, coiling it in his left hand. With his right hand, he began whirling the end of the chain. He waited for the right moment, when the striga would step away from the gravestones and come out into the open.

He got his chance, quicklier than he expected.

The chain whipped through the air, and the creature crouched and lunged into an attack from a prone position. Instead of enveloping the striga, the chain merely brushed against its back. It howled angrily, the skin sizzled and smoked upon contact with the silver.

The witcher did not get a second chance. Before his astonished eyes, the striga seized the chain with both its paws; the hissing and smoke from its scorched skin seemed to have no effect on it, it merely shrieked in fury and yanked on the chain. Geralt prudently released his end, but the last links snagged against his belt buckle. Geralt lost his rhythm, lost his balance and fell on a gravestone, knocking it over. The striga launched an attack with a wild leap and pinned Geralt to the ground, its fangs were snapping just above his face, saliva was washing over his eyes. He twisted out from beneath it and struck furiously at the hairy ear with the silver studs of his glove. He hit once, twice, and thrice until he finally threw it off.

Geralt rolled away, taking cover behind a gravestone, managing to get back on his feet. The striga charged again, this time he barely avoided being pinned in a lightning-quick dodge. He stumbled, barely keeping his balance. And the striga was already at him, clawing at his jacket, snarling its teeth mere inches from his face. He shoved it back with a desperate blow from his silver-studded glove so hard that it fell to the ground. Before it was back on its feet, he jumped back, forming his fingers into the Aard sign.

It did not work.

He tried again, rather awkwardly out of fear. Again, it did not work.

The elixir should have prevented this, but the battle frenzy had suddenly given way to panic. The panic washed over him like a waterfall, and it dictated his further actions. Geralt jumped back, unsheathed his sword. Leaping and spinning, he cut at the attacking striga's neck with a classic mandritto tondo. The upper half of its split head fell dangled from its shoulder, yet the creature still advanced, flailing its clawed paws wildly. The witcher circled the striga and struck again. The head came off and rolled between the graves. A geyser of arterial blood gushed forth from the creature's neck. Geralt managed to leap away before being drenched in blood.

He approached slowly and cautiously. He knew that a magically invoked creature could cause damage even after losing its head. However the striga lay among the gravestones and looked entirely dead. And it was, in a pool of

blood which was still being pumped by its heart.
Then it began to change right before his eyes.
Gradually, starting from its feet: shins, thighs, abdomen, breasts, until it became a very young girl. Very young. And very dead. For she was headless.
Geralt swore rather foully. This was not the effect he had expected, nor could he be proud of it. And he was not proud at all.
He leant down and looked closer, astonished. The last thing reminding of the striga was that strange pattern on the girl's skin, as if burned in or etched with acid. The pattern was fading, slowly but surely disappearing, yet still visible.
It resembled fish scales or plates of a scale armour.

****

Commandant Elena Fiachra de Mersault stared at him in silence for a long time.
"Come again," she finally said.
"I had to," he obediently repeated, "carry out an… annihilation."
"Complete?" she asked after another moment of silence. "Complete annihilation?"
"As complete as possible."
"Well," she tilted her head. "I can see it myself, after all."
Instinctively, he rubbed his face and felt the dried blood. He had not managed to avoid the fountain of blood gushing from the striga. It explained the reaction of the chambermaid and the guards, who were denying entry to the commandant's bedroom to a person splattered with blood like a butcher or a doctor.
Elena Fiachra de Mersault rubbed her eyes and yawned. While Geralt was arguing with the guards, she had managed to get out of bed and get dressed. She put on trousers and high boots but was still in a nightgown that she had stuffed into the trousers. The flannel pink nightgown was fastened at the neck with three buttons, its collar had rounded corners.
"Well," she finally said. "What's done is done. However, the margrave will not be pleased. I think, this is not the effect he expected."
Now it was Geralt's turn to remain silent for a long time. He wondered what and how to say it.
"I know," he finally said in a low voice, "why the girl had transformed into a striga, who had cast the spell and who is to blame."
"To blame?" Commandant de Mersault lifted her head, placing both hands on the tabletop. "Don't you think that seeking the guilty and passing judgment is quite beyond your discretion? That your words are far beyond your competence and craft?"
"Well, yes," he sighed. "Not long ago, a certain blacksmith put me wise to it. Let everyone, he said, mind his own business. A blacksmith's business is the anvil and the hammer. Punishment for murders is the business of the district

head and the courts. And the witcher's business is the sword."
"Well," the commandant squinted, "what a wise man that blacksmith was. And he got straight to the heart of the matter. However, you just said something that you should avoid in this situation. Because the only one guilty of murder is you, yourself. Someone else, with more experience and skills — a magician, a priest, a scholar, another witcher finally — could have lifted the curse from the girl. There was a chance. You definitively deprived the girl of that chance by murdering her. Do not interrupt. Of course, I will not make such accusations against you, I recognise the fact that you acted out of necessity and for a genuinely higher good. Thanks to you, from this night on, there will be no more victims."
"I would like to believe that."
"What do you mean?"
"You also know who is to blame, Commandant."
She drummed her fingers on the tabletop.
"An interesting assumption," she said. "One which I deny, by the way. Suspicions, assumptions, and guesses are not knowledge. You also have no knowledge. You have conjectures. And what would you like to do based on those conjectures?"
She leant over and looked him in the eyes.
"What would you like to do, may I ask? Just like in Glass Mountain, crash the entire rib cage of the suspect with crosswise cuts? I was there, I saw what you did to the dyer. So what now? Who will you start with? Will you massacre Deianira before Herzeloide's eyes or Herzeloide before Deianira's? The mother before the eyes of the daughter or vice versa?"
"In Glass Mountain it was…"
"You saved the mayor, his wife, and two children from death, I know," she interrupted him sharply. "Here you will save no one. There is no one to save."
"As a matter of fact…" he stammered. "As a matter of fact, there is someone. Someone, someday, eventually in the future… Who can know what these two might still weave on their little loom? What next pattern? If someone knows how to cast a spell…"
"Surely they will cast it again?" she interrupted. "Well, there are no guarantees. Especially if similar circumstances arise. If some drunken old man goes crazy over some fifteen-year-old girl, she flirts with the old man and wiggles her arse in front of him, but keeps him at a distance, not allowing him to come close until he fulfills her demands and whims. And he, completely bamboozled, would fulfill every her wish. Yes, you may conjecture that. Obsessed with the girl, Lindenbrog was quite seriously planning to make her, the object of his desires, a margravine. For him, this is not the first time; for the same reason, he expelled his previous wife. Now he intended to expel Deianira along with her daughter. The child, which as a result of an illness, is deaf and mute."
"That's why," she continued, "there will be no investigation. There is no point.

It is obvious and indisputable for everyone that the girl became a striga because she was conceived in an incestuous relationship of her father with his own daughter. This has already been widely spread and is already the official version. And let it remain so. Do we understand each other?"
He nodded.
"Excellent."
Elena Fiachra de Mersault slapped the table with her hand. "The sun is rising, and the miners from the settlement will soon be ready for their shift. I will go and announce the great news to them. The brave witcher has rescued them. He valiantly fought the monster, defeated it, and killed it. The danger is gone, they can stop barring their doors with stakes at night. And they will be able to go to the tavern in the evening and return home even late at night. The entire mining settlement, brave witcher, and the entire castle of Brunanburh will know about the event before the sun rises high. And before, which is no less important, Margrave Lindenbrog crawls out from under his blanket, yawns, and demands wine. Do you understand me?"
He nodded again.
"Excellent," the commandant repeated. "And now I will get dressed, so get out. Go to your quarters, stay there, do not go out, and do not open the door to anyone except me."
He obeyed without a word.

Something is coming, strange as spring. I am afraid.
John Gardner, *Grendel*

CHAPTER TWELVE

"I've been expecting you sooner." Preston Holt stirred the contents of the pot with a wooden spoon, and fished out a piece of wild boar rib from the cabbage. "Rumours had it that you were in Brunanburh around mid-October. What have you been up to?"

"Nothing in particular." Geralt licked his greasy fingers and took a sip of wine. "In Brunanburh I enlisted as an escort for a salt caravan headed to Ard Carraigh. They promised to compensate me handsomely, and I was strapped for cash. The caravan set off shortly before Saovine, but it moved at a snail's pace. The cold was setting in, and I feared that soon the snows would fall, leaving us strandedin some camp until spring…"

"But finally you are here. Just on Midinváerne. In the nick of time, as they say."

****

Of course the Circle of the elven calendar was well-known at Kaer Morhen, along with its eight festivals, eight magical points marked along the perimeter of the Circle. The witchers were familiar with Imbaelk, Lammas, Belleteyn, Saovine, as well as the solstices and equinoxes. However, they regarded these days merely as calendar dates. No one at the Witchers' Keep ever thought to celebrate or venerate these occasions. Therefore, Geralt was quite astonished when, on Midinváerne, the day of the winter solstice, he finally reached the little town of Ban Fillim, then the estate of Rocamora, the residence of Preston Holt. It was after dark, and the glow of fire seen from afar initially caused him some unease. Soon, however, the sounds of merry and cheerful songs reassured him, for they could not possibly accompany a fire or any other unpleasant accident. Everything became clear when he reached the yard. A large bonfire blazed there, and the whole personnel of the estate sat on benches arranged around it, there were also present a few relatives, in-laws, or acquaintances who had come from nearby villages. Geralt had barely dismounted when he was greeted with overwhelming and jumbled wishes of happy Solstice and joyous Yule, along with a frothy mug of beer and a piece of roasted sausage. He had to linger with the company and even pretend to be singing along. This did not last long — Preston Holt promptly ushered Geralt into the hall and seated him at a table. On this table the housekeeper soon placed a jug of wine and a steaming pot, which turned out to contain young wild boar ribs immersed in stewed cabbage.

Holt took two goblets from the cupboard, dusted them off, and filled them.

"Tell me." He sat down at the table. "Tell me your story, Witcher Geralt."

****

Geralt told him his story. Sometimes he stammered and sounded awkward. He told about everything, or almost everything, that had happened since the

month of Blathe until the onset of winter. Holt listened without interruption, at times he seemd to be dozing off. He perked up a bit when Geralt came to his encounter with Commander Fiachra de Mersault, his audience with Margrave Lindenbrock, and his battle with the striga.
From the yard the sounds of singing, laughter, and cheerful shouts still floated in the chamber. The festive revelry continued unabated.
“On the day after I killed the striga,” Geralt concluded his tale, “before the clock chimed noon, the whole Brunanburh, the castle, the surrounding village, and the miners celebrated the death of the monster, while I suddenly found myself elevated to the status of a hero.”
Preston Holt listened in silence, toying with his goblet.
“Commandant de Mersault made sure that word of my exploit reached everyone, from the tiniest child to the oldest man. Wherever I appeared, I was boisterously praised and saluted, to the point of embarrassment. They wanted to carry me shoulder-high through the streets, but I would not allow it. They began composing and singing songs in my honour. But what could I do? I had to endure it because…”
“Margrave Lindenbrock.” Holt surmised.
“That’s right. The commandant knew what she was doing by drawing attention to me. The striga’s severed head didn’t make the margrave happy, I imagine he was already contemplating adding my own head to his collection, above the fireplace, placed between the moose and the mouflon. Yet he had to grin and bear it, as retaliation was impossible against a hero universally celebrated for saving the populace from the mortal danger. Especially since the crowd also boisterously hailed the margrave for bringing in and hiring the witcher. As for the miners, they began to return and were extracting salt with renewed vigour, it became easier for the margrave to bear the absence of the young lady he had favoured. But…”
Geralt hesitated. Holt did not rush him.
“He did not pay me anything. And he did not wish to see me. The latter, in fact, pleased me somewhat, for…”
He fell silent. And remained quiet for a long time. Preston Holt nodded, stood up, and took a large square bottle of dark glass from the cupboard.
“I see,” he said, pouring, “that your tale needs something stronger than this thin wine. Come on, drink.”
“What could I…” Geralt took a sip from the goblet, gasped for breath, and coughed. “What could I tell the margrave? That it was all my fault? That instead of exhausting the striga with dancing until third cockcrow, I simply beheaded it because… because my legs suddenly turned to jelly, and my throat tightened so that my vision blurred?”
Preston Holt remained silent. The fire in the fireplace crackled.
“I should have told him,” Geralt lifted his head, “that something is amiss with me, that I am a defect, a flawed, failed witcher? That he made a mistake by entrusting the task to me instead of to some… better version of a witcher?

One who simply can not feel, even without potions, what I felt there? Would the margrave understand this? I doubt it. Because I do not understand myself."
Holt remained quiet.
"That marauder, whom I killed back in March… the one who almost got me hanged… he lunged at me with an axe, and I did not even draw my sword. I evaded the blow with ease. It wasn't until the second attempt, when he was going to strike again, that I… and I felt nothing. Not even my breath quickened. The same with that dyer… So, what is wrong with me, Preston Holt? Can you explain that to me?"
Holt stood up.
"No, I can't. Let's go to sleep. It has grown late."

****

The winter, as it turned out, was tracking Geralt down from the north, hot on his heels. Two days after Midinváerne, a biting, freezing wind came. The next day the sky turned dark, and snowflakes began to dance in the air. By the following day, the entire area had been blanketed in snow. After several more days, the drifts piled up high, reaching the horizon like mountains, and the roofs of all the estate buildings donned thick white caps. There was no doubt — the Kaedweni winter had arrived, and the landscape would remain unchanged at least until March, if not until April.

****

A few days later, as the sun set, Geralt and Preston Holt sat by the fireplace with goblets in hand. Without haste, Holt broached a matter that had long occupied Geralt's thoughts.
"Do you know, Geralt, what is the origin of witchers? How they came to existence? What was the beginning of it all?"
"I do. You mentioned it in Spynham. We supposedly descend from witches…"
"That's also true. But I am talking about the very beginning. Would you like to hear it?"
"Certainly."
Holt took a sip from his goblet, gazing at the glowing logs in the fireplace.
"As with all inventions and innovations," he began, "the impulse came from the military and war. Every leader dreamt of a unit for special tasks, composed of extraordinarily capable and unbeatable supermen. Every ruler and every self-proclaimed king desired to have a similar guard at hand. Sorcerers, specifically an elite group known as the Circle, decided to meet this demand. By creating a superhuman, an enhanced version of the human species, they intended to take the first step in the evolution of humankind to a higher level in every respect. In theory — or rather in theories, for there were several of them — it was about creating a transitional form from which

a new, superior human race would emerge through natural selection. The methods varied. Some sorcerers opted for resurrecting corpses and selecting the dead. Others focused on not-yet-born fetuses. Yet others worked with children. There were no results for a long time, and the unsuccessful subjects ended up in laboratory crematoriums, which smoked nonstop."
"But eventually they succeeded."
"Indeed, they did. Apparently, by pure chance. But they ultimately created the mutagen, anatoxin, hormone, and virus — everything that was needed. And of course, they perfected their formulas and magical rituals necessary for these concoctions to work. Yet when everything was finally in place and all that remained was to apply it in practice, one of the sorcerers working on the project stole all the materials and fled."
"Like the hero from the legend, I've forgotten his name… the one who supposedly stole fire from the gods and gave it to humankind, right?"
"Well, I might not go that far. The Circle of Sorcerers, as one would expect, accused the renegade of all sorts of offences, including a vile conspiracy to acquire power over the world. Others attributed more noble motives to him, suggesting that while he intended to create a superhuman, it was not for his own power, nor to protect some king, but for people. And people, I remind you, were suffering greatly from monsters that made their existence sometimes nearly impossible. The improved being was meant to protect and save people from monsters. It was to be a salvation and a remedy for every evil."
"The renegade sorcerer," Holt continued, deep in thought, "soon met his end under unclear circumstances. However, he had managed to construct a laboratory in which creation of these improved beings started. The laboratory was established in the North, far behind the sources of the Toina River.
"Mirabel." Geralt stated, not asked.
"Mirabel," Holt confirmed. "An ancient citadel near the Traanberg mountain. The sorcerer had students. And it was them who produced the first witchers in Mirabel."
"What about Beann Grudd and Kaer Morhen?"
"They arose later. Among the students I mentioned, there were differing opinions on how best to create the best mutations . Eventually, a schism occurred, and three branches emerged from one. There was a demand for witchers, as monsters effectively plagued people's lives. So, they produced as many as they could, without regard for the consequences. And it was the beginning of the end."
Geralt remained silent.
"I could swear," Holt said, "that I know what your earliest memory of Kaer Morhen is. For mine is the same. A large dormitory with twenty beds. Boys around. Impossible to sleep. Someone is crying, someone is groaning, another is screaming or talking in their sleep. Weeks go by, and it grows quieter. Finally, it is completely silent. Because only three of you remain."

“One boy,” Geralt muttered, “was just a baby. He cried incessantly. One day, they took him away… and he never returned.”
“Mutations,” Holt nodded, “can be spontaneous. Errors are inevitable in the production of elixirs. And pathogens that are produced and stored in cellars degrade. Nothing lasts forever. I wasn’t the only one to believe that the Trials should be done with. One child survived out of ten. There could be no talk of an acceptable limit of error. It bordered on crime.”
“It took a while, and there were quarrels, disputes, and arguments. But eventually, reason prevailed. The Trials were completely ceased. Unfortunately, it was too late. You’ve heard of the Cats, haven’t you? That occurred, as you know, in Beann Grudd. In Mirabel something even worse reportedly happened, but the mistakes were promptly… eliminated. Nothing like that ever occurred in Kaer Morhen. When you left the stronghold, how many children were still there?”
“Six.”
“I wonder how many will survive. In any case, you, Geralt, are one of the last who set out from Kaer Morhen on the trail.”
“One of the last. It is unfortunate that I seem to be faulty. Is it due to those expired elixirs?”
“Perhaps. Perhaps it is not the only reason. Nature, when it encounters mutation, fights against it. You have no choice, young Witcher. You must come to terms with your own imperfection.”

****

Winter did not relent. It rather seemed to grow harsher still. Rocamora was enveloped in drifts. Holt quickly devised a means to combat the boredom and inactivity. This was not a bear den, and no one would fall into a winter slumber, he declared. There are activities for the winter months, activities that no witcher may neglect.
Clad in stitched jackets and protective leather caps, armed with three-foot oak staffs, both witchers practiced attacks, parries, and feints for hours on end. There was much to practice.
They practiced the angelica and angelica ridoppio, unfailing attacks to the carotid artery. Delta and delta stocatta, culminating in a cut of the femoral artery. Alpha and alpha sottomano, targeting the axillary artery. Volta affondo two on three and volta affondo dexter aimed at the brachial artery. And of course, universal feints with versatile applications: the nine, lilia stretto passo, lilia fendente, and lilia montante. Naturally, there were also defensive parries for all the above-mentioned. During blizzards, snow storms, or severe frost, they were practicing in the barn, and when the wind calmed and temperature went up, they ventured out to the yard. And they practiced for hours. They wore just their shirts, from which steam poured like from cauldrons.
Despite Geralt’s entreaties, Holt refused to reveal the secret of his feint, the

one starting with a mandritto, then a molinetto and tramazzone. A feint against which there was practically no defence.
“I must have at least some secrets from you.”
“But at least tell me,” Geralt pressed, “did you come up with this feint yourself?” “No. I learned it from someone else.”
“Tell me.”
“Let’s go inside, it’s cold. And Miss Berta is already serving mulled beer.”

****

“There was one man from Beann Grudd…” Holt took a swig from his mug.
“A Cat?”
“Aha. But even for a Cat he was… let’s say, very faulty. Just a psychopathic scoundrel. In the end, they stripped him of his medallion and kicked him out. As he was a true master of the sword, he established a fencing school to make ends meet. I was curious, so I signed up. Incognito, under an assumed name, having dyed my hair with walnut husk extract.”
“And it was there that you learned this feint,” Geralt stated, not asked. ”
What about the defence against it? Did the Cat teach you the parry?”
“There is no parry against it. There is only one way to defend yourself.”
“And what is it?”
“A crossbow bolt from ten paces away.”
“Are you joking?”
“No. A good piece of advice, Geralt: that master trained several students. If you encounter any of them, run. And run fast.”

****

Both Holt and Geralt were skilled enough swordsmen and during their training they did not sustain any serious injuries. Lesser ones, well, they occurred, and frequently. In the evenings, the housekeeper would apply medicinal salve to their bruises — purportedly bear fat, though it smelled too strongly of goat to be truly bear fat. However, goat or not, the salve had healing powers, and on the following day both witchers were as good as new and could once again take up their oaken sticks.
Thus it was particularly strange when one February morning Preston Holt fell ill enough so that he could not rise from his bed. There was no thought of summoning a doctor, and with the snow drifts as they were, none of the roads were passable. All that remained was bed, vodka, and goat fat. The fencing sessions, naturally, had to be suspended.
This enforced idleness eventually drew Geralt’s attention to a small alcove and the shelves of books concealed within. One had to admit, Holt had an impressive library. Of course, it could not compete with the collection of the temple in Elsborg, but no outsider was permitted to access the tomes in the temple of the priestesses, thus Geralt could only imagine the hidden

knowledge it contained. Yet Holt's library was easily accessible. Therefore, Geralt reached for whatever he could find. And there was much to choose from. The shelves bore four bestiaries, two of which were entirely unknown to Geralt, while the other two were in far better condition than those from Kaer Morhen. There was a well-preserved edition of the *Physiologus*, as well as the *Aviarium et Reptiliarium* by Hugon of Alny, a true rarirty. Historical and geographical works such as Roderick de Novembre's *World History*, Baldwin Adovardo's *Regni Caedvenie Nova Descriptio*, anonymous *Liber Memorabilium*, and the ancient *Chronicon Novigradense* were also present. There was no shortage of treatises on magic and grimoires, such as Paolo Giambattista's *Powers of Elements*, Jan Bekker's *The Invisible World*, *Ard Aercane*, and *Dhu Dwimmermorc*.

Holt, smeared with goat fat, groaned in his bed while Geralt perused the tomes.

As the trite adage suggests, books were to be a source of all knowledge and the key to all mysteries. And indeed, one of those mysteries, not the least significant, lay hidden in Holt's library. And Geralt found it when it fell out from among the other books.

****

"I told you about my encounter with that… Tryllo…"

"You mean Estevan Trillo da Cunha," Preston Holt corrected him, carefully stretching as he had just risen from his bed, seemingly healthy and recovered. "Estevan Trillo da Cunha is the *praefectus vigilum*, that is the prefect of the royal guard."

"Precisely. I mentioned to you that this prefect attempted to recruit me to find evidence against you. Proofs of crimes you supposedly committed. Yet you waved your hand dismissively at my words, mocking that I could have easily let myself be recruited to search for that evidence. Because such evidence does not exist."

"I did say that. And indeed, there is no evidence."

"No evidence, you say." Geralt displayed a thin and somewhat worn booklet. "And look what I found in your library. It fell from among other books. *Monstrum or the Description of a Witcher* with a handwritten dedication: "To Wachtmeister Otto Margulies, in gratitude for faithful service." Ha. Otto Margulies, a distinguished community member and something beginning with "phil", I forgot the word. And it turns out he's a wachtmeister or a mercenary soldier. But that's precisely the slain Margulies, about whom that prefect spoke. How did you come by this little book?"

Holt shrugged. Geralt snorted.

"Of course, it was foolish to ask. And what about the trophies of those two others, what were their names? Nourred and Chwalba? Are they also hidden somewhere here?"

"Perhaps they are. Who knows?" Holt crossed his arms over his chest.

“Search. They may tumble out from somewhere as well.”
“Wachtmeister Margulies, Nourred, and Chwalba apparently led that mob that attacked Kaer Morhen in ninety-fourth. Though I can’t say I mourn them, nor do I intend to shed any tears for them…”
“I’m glad to hear it,” Holt jeered. “Because I was beginning to think you might want to hold a funeral feast for them.”
“Rocamora.” Geralt was not affected by the jeer. “*Roac a moreah*. In the Elder Speech: revenge. You certainly did not acquire the estate along with the name. You named it yourself. I wonder, was it before or after the killings?”
Holt shrugged again.
“Recently,” Geralt continued calmly, “a certain blacksmith told me quite a wise thing. He said, let each man mind his business. For him, a blacksmith, it was the anvil and hammer. For a witcher, it is to slay monsters. As for punishing criminals, that is the job of the district head and the court.”
“Words worth remembering.” Holt grew serious. “Keep them in mind when you throw yourself with your sword to defend some maiden in distress next time. Before you put a man to death.”
“That was quite different…”
“You’re wrong, it is precisely the same. And enough of that. Summon Miss Berta. Let her come here with her salve.”

****

They did not return to the conversation for quite some time. Eventually, however, they did. Geralt forced himself to finish reading an anonymous work entitled *Monstrum or the Description of a witcher*. At times he laughed, sometimes he scowled, and often he cursed quite profusely. But he read it to the end.
“This entry,” he pointed to the dedication for the wachtmeister Margulies, “was undoubtedly written by the author of the work himself. Shame he didn’t sign it.”
“But he did. Look closely.”
“This picture? This little bird?”
“Martlet. That’s what it’s called in heraldry. Surely a mobile charge of the author’s coat of arms. Unfortunately, such mobile charges are too common to trace back to the right person.”
“So,” Geralt said slowly, “you don’t know who it is. Ha, another unnecessary question. Surely, had you known, you would have killed him. Right?”
“No,” drawled Holt. “I would have rushed straight to the district head. Sir, I wish to report that such and such has authored a pamphlet with which he incited a hundred fanatics against witchers. As a result, seven witchers lost their lives, and one barely survived. Yes, sir, I know that there is no article against writing pamphlets, and the law has no penalties for pamphleteering. *Nullum crimen sine lege*. But it is quite vile to write such things. That’s why, I ask you, sir, to have this pamphleteer arrested and brought to trial as quickly

as possible. Let the law and justice prevail."
"Are you mocking me?"
"Of course, I am."

****

Though the winter was harsh, it surrendered surprisingly easily and almost without a struggle. Warm winds blew, the snow began to vanish rapidly. By mid-February, known by the elves as Imbaelk, the hazel trees blossomed, thick clusters overtook the southern side of the estate. The entire bushes were covered with golden-yellow catkins, resembling those of a fox. Snow cornices hung over the banks of the stream hidden among the alders and willows, the edges of the nearby bogs and shallow swamps were also covered with ice. This did not bother the frogs, which enthusiastically began their mating rites. Soon all the waters were thick with spawn.
Finally, the larks began to sing over the fields, heralding the inevitable arrival of spring,.
And at last came the Equinox, which officially marked the beginning of spring.
And Geralt made a decision.

****

No, in truth, he had not made a decision. He wrestled with his thoughts for several nights of poor sleep. He recalled his conversation with the priestess Assumpta from Rivia. He recalled the words of Estevan Trillo da Cunha, the prefect of the royal guard. He regretted his discovery among the books. Yet he believed he was ready to decide.
But in the morning, when he woke up, he wasn't.

****

For breakfast they had delicious pancakes with jam. But Preston Holt ate little. He had dark circles under his eyes, resembling someone who had a couple of rough nights.
"It is time for us to say goodbye," he announced tersely. "I have decided to conclude our adventure, Geralt. Nothing lasts forever. From this spring on, you shall act on your own account. As soon as it gets warmer, you will leave Rocamora."
"But… I mean, listen…"
"You will leave Rocamora."
"Does this have something to do with…"
"It certainly does. Your… and my misfortune that you discovered… what you discovered. Estevan Trillo da Cunha will not give up, he will continue to dog your footsteps. If he presses you, you will not lie your way out, I see that you are a poor liar. You will ruin… yourself, first of all."

“I…”
“Don’t interrupt me. It is high time you saw that longed-for sea of yours. And a bit of the world.”
Geralt remained silent.
“And now,” Holt rose, “put on your protective gear and take a stick. It is spring, no need to stay indoors. We’re heading to the yard. Before you leave, we shall practice a few more feints.”

The hippocamp, equus marinus monstrosus, also known as the borbothis or zidrach, is half horse and half fish. Its upper part, id est its head resembles the head of a horse, albeit it has fins instead of hooves, while its lower part bears the likeness of a fish.
Science has demonstrated that, contrary to its name, the hippocamp inhabits not only the seas but also freshwater environments, for it is duplicis generis. If found in freshwater, it most commonly resides in vast lakes. The hippocamp is often confounded, even by learned people, with such creatures as the sea deer (cervus marinus or polmorarius) or the sea donkey (onus marinus).
The hoi polloi mistakenly believes that the hippocamp is a hybrid, a natural offspring of a horse and a fish circa coitum. This notion is erroneous, for how could such a coitus even occur? One can become insane at the mere contemplation of it.
Physiologus

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

To his Lordship Prefect of the Guard
Estevan Trillo da Cunha
to Ard Carraigh
Written: in Ban Fillim, on the eighteenth of April, in the ninth year of the reign of His Highness King Miodrag.

Your Lordship, Sir Prefect,
I humbly report to you what has happened in the estate known as Rocamora. The suspect Holt has once more succumbed to an illness, and a doctor was summoned to the estate. As for the young witcher, calling himself Gerald, the one whom Your Lordship has taken a particular interest in, he has departed from the estate. Since he left secretly under the cover of night, I cannot report when he departed or where he has gone. I beg your forgiveness for this.

Wishing Your Lordship all possible happiness,
Yours truly,
Uger Zolteri, special agent of the Crown

****

"So, sir young witcher," said the merchant, taking off his hat and wiping his brow, pointing to a roadside post with a nailed plaque, "here we are, it's the Lakeland March. The town of Tullach is over there, just beyond the forest! We are home! Safe! All thanks to you!"
"Uh, come on," Geralt waved his hand dismissively. "It was a peaceful journey and nothing occurred."
"Nothing occurred because a witcher was ready to help. Better safe than sorry, and you kept me safe. Such was the agreement, and you earned your fifty marks, indeed, honestly. Let us be off! Hey, hurry up!"
The whips cracked, the axles creaked, and the wheels rumbled over the ruts. The two merchant carriages rolled along the road.
"The Lakeland March," Geralt examined the plaque on the post. When they got closer he managed to discern a coat of arms on the rusted surface: on a black field there were two silver fish addorsed, meaning backs turned towards each other.
"So that's it?"
"Indeed. Do you see down the water glimmering down there? That's Lake Tuaim Dur, its very end because next to it it lies the second lake, called Long Lake. The town of Tullach stands on its shore. You shall see soon for yourself!"
Geralt hardly knew anything about the Lakeland March. *Regni Caedvenie Nova Descriptio*, the work of Baldwin Adovardo, was available in Preston Holt's library, but Geralt had merely skimmed its pages. That's why he didn't

know that there were four principal lakes, from which the march took its name: Tuaim Dur, Long Lake, Toikka, and Rannveig. There were eight smaller ones, but few people except the local fishermen remembered their names. As for the tiny lakes, no one bothered to count them, and their names were completely forgotten. They were ribbon lakes that were carved a very, very long time ago by glacial movements and washed out by river currents flowing underneath them. That is, in theory, for the theories about glaciers and glaciation were just beginning to take root in the minds of the most advanced Oxenfurt scholars. The oldest scholars still stubbornly attributed the landscape's formation to the influence of the Higher Power and its characteristic diversity to the enthusiastic and creative faculties ascribed to that Power. And when it came to people from outside Oxenfurt and university circles, you could speak of glaciers as much as you wished, they wouldn't understand a thing. When you inquired about the origins of the lake, they would say the lakes were holes filled with rainwater. Geralt also did not know that the line of the lakes, arranged on the north-south axis, historically delineated the eastern boundary of the Lakeland March and the kingdom of Kaedwen itself. The boundary was well-established. People settled on the western shores of the lakes. To the east of them, stretching all the way to the distant Blue Mountains, lay wild and impassable forests, still effectively resisting the axes of the settlers.

They had exited the forest. The silver expanse of the lake gleamed below. A black spot of an island, rather distant from the shore, stood out in the middle of the lake. The town by the shore was encircled by palisades. The wooden pier was bustling with fishing boats, drying nets hung from the poles, and smoke billowed from the smokehouses. Gulls and terns soared and squeaked over the scene.

The gate with a turnstile leading into Tullach stood wide open, and the guards stationed there exhibited little interest in the merchant and his two carts. One, however, seemed to know the merchant, for he engaged him in animated conversation. Geralt glanced around, uncertain whether entering the town was worth his while or if they should continue their journey without delay. His contemplation was interrupted by the excited voice of the merchant.

"Oh, young mister witcher! Fortune smiles upon you! They are looking for a witcher here in Tullach. They say a notice was posted on the border post. We didn't see it, some rogue must have taken it down…"

"If you are indeed a witcher," said the commander of the post, approaching, "then proceed without delay to the magistrate, there they shall tell you everything. Straight down this alley to the square, a house with green doors, adorned with a gilded painting of a tower and a crown. You'll find it easily."

****

"Show me your witcher's medallion," demanded the burgrave. "It's not that I

don't trust you or, gods forbid, smell some foul play…"
He interrupted himself, bent down, and examined the wolf medallion that Geralt had taken out from beneath his shirt.
"Forgive me," the burgrave switched to a more polite tone. "But you are quite young, that's why…"
"Witcher," spoke up a solemn man clad in a leather coat, girdled with a belt with steel clasps and links, who had been silently present in the chamber.
"You are to be hired not by the town authorities, but by the illustrious margrave who oversees the entirety of the march. I am his representative here. My name is Diego Mars, seneschal Diego Mars."
"I greet you, m'lord seneschal. What am I to be hired for?"
"Castle Thornhall, the summer residence of the margrave, is haunted by some creature. You have to ensure, by any means necessary, that this creature no longer haunts the place. Details will be explained on site. You will be handsomely compensated, I assure you."
"Where is this castle? Shall we leave at once?"
"We are still waiting for someone."
The burgrave sighed and waved his hands.
"And it seems we shall wait quite a while," he said with a dollop of sarcasm.
"The esteemed lady is keeping us waiting. It appears to be a habit among sorceresses to make others wait."
He pointed toward a disk the size of a crown lying on the table, adorned not with the profile of the Novigrad hierarch, but etched with runes and strange symbols. In the center of the disk there was a protrusion, a semi-precious stone of a golden-yellow hue.
"This is a summoning gem," explained the burgrave. "It is called tere port. If this yellow stone is pressed with force thrice, it sends out a call, and the summoned individual will arrive posthaste, by magical means. This is termed tere portantion. We have summoned her, now we wait. It has already been a long time…"
"And we shall wait," interjected seneschal Diego Mars gloomily, "for as long as necessary. A healer is urgently required, and without her, I shall not return to Thornhall because…"
A loud, somewhat insect-like buzzing filled the air, intensifying into a buzzing crescendo. A glowing oval appeared by the wall of the chamber. First, a vague silhouette flickered within the oval, and then a short woman in men's clothes emerged.
The burgrave and seneschal rose and bowed.
"Most esteemed Lady…"
Geralt also bowed. His amulet vibrated sharply and pulsed beneath his shirt. He remembered the sorceresses he had seen in the market at Spynham, they looked young and beautiful like a picture. The woman with short dark hair emerging from the magical oval could hardly be described as unattractive, but she lacked their dazzling beauty. Nor was she young, she seemed to be

slightly older than the priestess Nenneke from Elsborg. However, her chubby rosy face radiated warmth, giving off an immediately perceptible emotion that made Geralt unable to take his eyes off her, despite recalling Preston Holt's teachings that sorceresses hated being stared at and regarded others as cattle. The woman before him did not give off such an impression.
"Where am I?" The woman's voice was pleasant and melodic. "I do not recognise this place but this is not Thornhall."
"This is Tullach, my lady. I am the burgrave…"
The woman took a large canvas bag from her shoulder and put it on the floor.
"How did my talisman end up in Tullach?" she asked. "I left it in Thornhall for the margrave Vaikinen to use."
"His Excellency the margrave," stammered the burgrave, "entrusted this talisman to me…"
"Because," interjected the seneschal, "he did not want a teleportation talisman to be on Seevalk. The margrave had his reasons."
"Indeed," added the burgrave. "So His Excellency gave me the talisman to use in case of an emergency…"
"And an emergency has arisen, as I understand. Where is the patient? The margrave's son, young Count Frederik, who suffered an accident?"
"Do you know already?" the seneschal asked, visibly startled. "So quickly? How did you learn?"
"Magic, gossip, and carrier pigeons. You are Seneschal Diego Mars, if I remember well? We have met before."
"Truly so," the seneschal bowed again. "Greetings, esteemed Lady Natteravn. The injured Count Frederik is at Thornhall, on Seevalk. We shall go there without delay."
Geralt's medallion vibrated once again.
"And what about the witcher present here?" The sorceress fixed her green eyes upon him. "Will you accompany us?"
"Aye, he will," Diego Mars interjected. "If you please, let us be on our way."
"My horse is in the stable…" interrupted Geralt.
"And let it remain there. We shall not be travelling by horse."

****

The destination, as it turned out, was Seevalk, an island on Long Lake, a dark, mist-shrouded shape visible in the distance. The means of transport turned out to be a large, unwieldy six-oared boat loaded with a considerable amount of crates, boxes, barrels, and sacks. The cargo also included four sheep and a black cat in a cage.
"Are we are to sail in this?" the sorceress exclaimed, astonished. "This barge? With this menagerie and a heap of luggage? You had a vessel waiting on Seevalk!
"This is not a barge," frowned Diego Mars. "This is a scow. And what we have waiting on Seevalk is not a vessel, but a sailing cutter. However, it is currently

occupied, so we are left with the scow. Please, board!"
They stepped aboard, taking seats nearer the bow. The rowers began to row in unison, the oars creaked in the rowlocks, and the vessel known as a scow, pushed off from the pier.
"Forgive me for not introducing myself sooner," said the woman after a moment. "I am Vrai Natteravn, a healer."
"Geralt. Witcher."
"I treated a witcher once. His name was Holt, Preston Holt. That was a long time ago, and I doubt someone as young as you… Are you sulking a bit? Ah, you've been told there's animosity between sorcerers and witchers, haven't you?"
"I have indeed."
"I shall not apologise for my fellow sorcerers," the sorceress grew serious. "But you should know that I do not hold grudges without cause. You must earn my animosity. So do not sulk. Agreed?"
"Agreed."
"Mars hired you, right? Does this have anything to do with the injured son of the margrave?"
"It has nothing to do with that. They say a monster has been troubling them on the island."
The wind blew, the rowlocks creaked, and the scow glided briskly over the waves. The fog began to lift. The seagulls cried. The sheep bleated. The cat miaowed.
"That sail, over there," the healer shielded her eyes with her hand. "Mr. Mars? Isn't that your vessel?"
"Cutter," corrected the seneschal patiently. "Sailing cutter "Nihil Novi"."
"And who is aboard? Who is sailing?"
"Friends and former fellow students of the illustrious Count Frederik. They are hunting hippocamps."
"Hunting what?"
"I'm telling you, hippocamps."
The sailing cutter "Nihil Novi" suddenly set course directly towards them. After a moment, it drew near enough for them to observe it better. It had three sails, two triangular ones at the front, and a large rectangular one at the back. As it approached still closer, they could distinguish several figures on the deck. Laughter, singing, and cries, not particularly sober, reached them.
"A jolly hunt," Vrai Natteravn remarked. "Hippocamps, you say? And what do they need these hippocamps for? What's the point of hunting?"
"You see, the matter is," the seneschal cleared his throat. "Last year Ezra Metzgerkop, a well-known restaurateur, gained favour with our king Miodrag by treating the monarch and court to an extraordinarily rare dish, a giant roasted bird, an apornis, if I recall the name correctly. The roast pleased the king so much that he rewarded Metzgerkop with the title of baron. Many

men got jealous of Metzgerkop. That's the reason for the hunts, a lot of people eager for a noble title rushed to the backwoods to hunt some even more unique specimen for the king…"
"I see. So those men over there, on the yacht…"
"On the cutter. I've mentioned, they are friends…"
"And former fellow students of the count. I heard that. And they want to kill a hippocamp?"
"Word has it that the king would relish such a meal. That's why they are desperate to capture one…"
"And become barons?"
"They are already barons. Most of them. But they seek fame and royal favour."
"Are the hippocamps really found here," Vrai Natteravn inquired, "in your lake?"
"Supposedly. But few have seen them up close, for they are exceedingly skittish. One must be stealthy, quiet… And as for those on the cutter… You can see for yourself."
"Indeed," replied the sorceress with a hint of sarcasm. "This is no hunt, it is a banquet on water."
As if to prove the point, one of the barons from the sailing cutter leant over the board and vomited profusely. The rest of the crew burst into laughter.
"*Nihil novi*," Vrai remarked.
The rowlocks creaked, the oars splashed droplets of water. The seagulls screeched. The cutter "Nihil Novi" caught the wind in its sails and sailed away. The drunken songs and shouts faded into the distance.
At a stone's throw from the bow of the scow the water suddenly stirred and several silvery fish leapt out madly from the depths.
"Trout," Geralt recognised. "Large ones, longer than a cubit. I wonder what scared them so much?"
"There are pikes on the bottom," explained Diego Mars, "some weigh up to sixty pounds or more. A cubit long trout is like a bleak for them. And other beasts dwell in the depths, of which I would rather not speak in the present moment…"
"What if," Vrai Natteravn speculated, "one of those infamous hippocamps frightened those trout?"
"Hippocamps," Geralt retorted, "do not eat fish. They do not hunt them."
"Then what do they eat?"
"Seaweed."
"Weeds? So they graze? Like cows?"
"You could say that."
"But it's better," insisted the seneschal, "not to say that. Especially at Thornhall. The young count Frederik, after all, recently suffered a mishap in a valiant encounter with a hippocamp. If people begin to whisper that a cow has injured him…"

“A hippocamp injured the count?” the healer was astonished. “How is that possible? They are supposed to be herbivores… What do you say about that, witcher?”
“Herbivores,” Geralt replied, “can be dangerous too.”

****

The fortress of Thornhall standing on the island of Seevalk was surrounded by a double palisade. The first showed its spikes right on the island shore now, at high water, but shortly after the melting of snow and ice it submerged almost halfway. The second palisade crowned an earthen levee rising several fathoms high. Two square towers loomed above the island.
“A true fortress,” assessed the witcher. “Defensive in nature, it seems.”
“Defensive it is,” agreed Diego Mars, “for it had defended itself on more than one occasion.”
“When the march was founded,” added Vrai Natteravn, “skirmishes with forest elves occurred here.”
“They had the eastern shore,” continued the seneschal, “while the western was ours, human. And the island served as an outpost. It changed hands many times. In the end, we prevailed and built the fortress. This was during King Benda’s reign, many years ago.”
They entered a bay which turned out to be a dug canal. A large, heavy gate made of beams barred the canal. They were spotted from a watchtower above the gate, and a shout echoed, followed by the sound of a horn. The gate opened slowly. There was a harbour past the gates, it was surrounded by wooden piers on all sides. The scow docked at one of them, finding a free spot among other boats.
Geralt looked around. What had appeared to be towers from a distance resembled blockhouses up close, built from impressively thick pine logs. Between the towers stood a single massive wooden building of multiple storeys, looking more like a fortified blockhouse than a home, just like the towers with embrasures for windows.
They disembarked onto the pier, and the rowers immediately began unloading the cargo. Vrai Natteravn seemed about to ask the seneschal something when he suddenly cleared his throat and bowed.
A girl flanked by two serving maids approached them on the pier. She had fair hair, she looked to be about fifteen or sixteen years old. She was extraordinarily beautiful, slender, and seemed delicate, fragile, almost breakable. She walked elegantly, raising and holding her fine cornflower blue gown slightly, so the hem wouldn’t catch on the rough boards.
Diego Mars bowed even lower. The girl cast a fleeting look at him with her large doe-like eyes, but only for a moment. It seemed she was solely interested in the cargo delivered by the scow.
“Countess Ludmilla,” Diego Mars explained in a low voice, perceiving Geralt’s questioning gaze. “The daughter of His Excellency Margrave Vaikinen. She is

currently residing here on Seevalk, one might say…"
"One might say," Vrai Natteravn snorted, "she is trapped here. No need to beat about the bush, Mr. Mars. The gossip has spread throughout all of Kaedwen."
"I'm not interested in gossip," the seneschal furrowed his brow. "By the way, the margrave as a father has the right to call his disobedient daughter to order. And if need be, to punish her."
"What has she done?" Geralt continued to gaze at the girl, mesmerised.
"It is a matter of love," smiled the healer. "A young girl's heart has begun to beat more vividly…"
"But at the wrong place," Diego Mars interrupted with a gloomy expression, "at the wrong time and for the wrong person. What more can I say, Lady, you probably already know everything. You are familiar with the gossips."
"Of course, I am," Vrai snorted again. "The heart of Countess Ludmilla was stolen, with her full consent and willingness, by the young Redfern Finnegan himself. There's the rub."
"What do you mean?"
"The families detest each other," Mars butted in, "the Vaikinens and the Finnegans. It's a family feud."
"A bloody one? Any victims?"
"Kind of," grimaced the seneschal. "But for you, young witcher, it would be better to concentrate not on idle gossips, but on your witcher's business. As for you, Lady, I must apologise, it is urgent that you attend to the suffering injured young count…"
"Indeed," the healer adjusted the bag slung over her shoulder. "I hurry to the injured young count as quickly as possible. We shall meet later, witcher. Lead the way, Mr. Mars."

****

Several women were cleaning fish nearby on the pier. Assisting them was the same black cat that had arrived on Seevalk along with Geralt and the healer. Fish scales, entrails, and swim bladders floated in the harbour waters.
The sun set beautifully over the lake, reflecting off its surface. Some cries were heard in the distance, probably it was cranes.
"When they questioned young Count Frederik Vaikinen," Vrai Natteravn recounted, leaning against the palisade, "he fabricated a plausible story that might fit, but I am a doctor, I can recognise the nature of injuries and their cause. So I forced him to confess. It was by no means a hippocamp or any other monster, mark my words, it was his fault. The margrave's son climbed for a show up the mast of the cutter in a state of drunkenness, and fell from it. He has a broken collarbone and a sprained ankle, and his bruised knee has swollen like a pumpkin; he will require a fluid withdrawal… And how are you, witcher?"
"Nothing much."

The creature prowling around Thornhall, as it turned out, had taken a fancy to the kitchen quarters, so Geralt went to ask around there. The cooks, kind-hearted women, welcomed him immediately with a mug of beer and a small pot of salted loach.

Geralt nibbled the fish while sipping beer, and the cooks related their accounts. The creature, they told him one after another, is small but bothersome. It has a frog-like mouth, bulging eyes and it croaks like a frog. It comes from the lake, bringing filth and muck on its frog-like paws, so they have to clean the place when it is gone. It fools around in various places. It devours their provisions. Once it peed in the corner. It scattered cereal and flour all over the kitchen. It smashed a teapot. It stole a silver ladle bearing the margrave's coat of arms. Geralt had serious doubts about this last claim, from the description, it was evident that a vodnik was wrongly accused of such theft, someone else must have nabbed the ladle.

The creature had last been seen some two weeks ago, the cooks confessed. Would you care for another beer?

Vrai Natteravn listened attentively without interruption.

"A vodnik can be irritating, but it is not dangerous for people," Geralt concluded with a sigh. "But since they are paying… Well, I'll have to patrol the area, keeping an eye on things, and if it appears, to scare it and drive it away… But you, lady, tell me about this family feud. Kind of bloody, I gather."

"You needn't call me "lady"", the sorceress kicked a fish head off the pier. "As for the family feud, it is as follows: Magnus Vaikinen, grandfather of the current margrave Sirius, had business with Roald Finnegan, they had a company. When it went bankrupt, Roald and Magnus accused each other publicly of embezzlement and theft. Eventually, Magnus challenged Roald to a duel. They hacked each other pretty good: both died. When Roald's wife heard about it, she had a miscarriage, and Magnus's frail and elderly father passed away due to the worries. Actually, here's the reason for the family feud, kind of bloody. Each generation has been contributing to it, up to this day. Sirius Vaikinen and Gordon Finnegan competed for the title of suzerain of the march. When the king appointed Sirius as margrave, Gordon shouted from the rooftops about foul play, nepotism, and corruption."

"And what about Miss Ludmilla?"

"A classic case, one might say. She met the young Count Redfern Finnegan, the son of Gordon and great-grandson of Roald, at some ball or banquet. You may fill in the rest."

"I'm not so good at filling in, and I've never been to any ball."

"They fell in love at first sight," the sorceress smiled. "They began to meet secretly. They knew their parents would not allow the relationship, so they decided to flee. Margrave Sirius thwarted their escape. He trapped his daughter here, on this inaccessible island, and entrusted her supervision to his son, Count Frederik, Ludmilla's brother. The margrave had good reasons for assigning the guard over his sister to his own son because Frederik has

entirely personal reasons to despise Redfern and will engage in no dealings with him, nor can he be bribed. He publicly declared several times that he would sooner see his sister dead than in a relationship with Redfern. Count Frederik, however, realised that the finest guardianship over the lovestruck sister was the island itself, rendering supervision unnecessary. That's why he ardently takes advantage of the independence and finances bestowed upon him by his father. He summoned his companions to Seevalk and they drink and revel ceaselessly under the guise of hunting hippocamps. Ah, speak of the devil. The tired and drunk monster-hunters are returning."
The harbour gates creaked open with a groan, and the sailing cutter "Nihil Novi" glided inside. It docked at the pier, and moments later, a group of young people disembarked, with some difficulty, from its deck. Most of them were staggering considerably and making quite a noise.
"The golden youth of Ard Carraigh," Vrai pouted her lips. "The offspring of rich, titled, and well-connected parents. I know some of them, not from their best side, alas. That one, the one who can hardly walk, is the younger son of Baron Dormont. I treated him, but I won't tell you for what. And that last one, perhaps the most sober of the bunch, is Primian Grohot, the son of the brewery owner, a nouveau riche. I have no clue what he is doing in this company."
"He is hunting for hippocamps."
Vrai snorted, amused by the suggestion.
"The hunt," she became serious again, "will surely bring me patients should any of them break something. As long as noone drowns, for in that case medicine is helpless. And I wouldn't worry about the hippocamps. The bacchanal young men do not seem capable of causing them any harm."
Geralt said nothing.
"Farewell for now," the healer adjusted her scarf. "I am going to drain fluid from the count's knee."
"Good luck."

…let us not be dainty of leave-taking,
But shift away: there's warrant in that theft
Which steals itself, when there's no mercy left
William Shakespeare, Macbeth

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

When night came, the whole of Thornhall plunged into impenetrable darkness. For safety's sake, as everything around was constructed of wood, all fires were meticulously extinguished, including the torches and lamps that illuminated the stairs and winding corridors during the day. The only light came from the faint glow of lanterns carried by the guards in the watchtower and on the palisade. These guards, as Geralt observed, treated their service and duties with remarkable negligence, relying on the island's inaccessibility. It was evident that the island and the fort had not faced a serious threat in a very long time, leading to routine and indolence among the guards. Geralt was certain that this was precisely why the vodnik could easily and safely penetrate the object shrouded in darkness. Well, even a herd of hippocamps leaping over the palisade could likely escape the notice of these slacking guards.

For Geralt, of course, darkness was not an obstacle, the starlight provided enough illumination for his mutated eyes. Once inside the building, he also relied on his hearing and his sense of smell — vodniks, as he knew, reeked of fish slime, mud, and decaying sweet flag.

There were no guards on the palisade tonight. They all gathered in the watchtower, playing cards and complaining about the dog's life on this shitty island, where there wasn't even anywhere to spend their wages, as the tavern and brothel were far away and across the water to boot. Geralt circled the palisade, searching for any hidden crevice beneath the drying nets through which a vodnik creeping from the lake might slip inside. Finding nothing suspicious, he entered the building. He had already patrolled the corridor leading to the kitchen areas, now he decided to check the corridor leading to the margrave's chambers, the armoury, the storehouse, and the guards' quarters. He had barely entered when his medallion vibrated strongly, pulsed and throbbed beneath his shirt.

Geralt took a few steps, and the medallion stopped vibrating. He turned back. After a few steps, the medallion came alive again. He retreated — the vibrating stopped. Something in the corridor was emitting magic.

The witcher raised his hand, forming his fingers into a Sign. The area instantly became bright. He approached, examined the spot closely. He had to bring his face almost to the wall, but finally, he saw it. On the wall, drawn with a thin, barely visible line of charcoal, was an outline in the shape of a door. And there was no doubt that this outline was indeed magical.

None of the bestiaries known to Geralt attributed magical abilities to vodniks. However, they all emphasised their great cunning and deceit and agreed that vodniks could mimic everything they saw, like monkeys.

If a vodnik acquired a magical amulet or other artifact, perhaps torn off a drowned man's body, would it know how to use it? Geralt did not know. But he decided to find out.

The light of the Sign dimmed, then went out completely. Geralt retreated a

few steps, concealing himself behind a bend in the corridor. He waited, without the slightest movement, in complete silence, slowing even his breathing.

He did not have to wait long.

The medallion vibrated strongly. The outline on the wall flared and glowed, the charcoal-drawn door opened, and something emerged from it.

Geralt reacted instantly. He reached the newcomer with a single leap and seized him in a mantis grip. However, the captive proved to be ever so strong that he set himself free from the grip almost effortlessly and threw the witcher with a powerful blow against the wall. Then he struck him with his fist. Geralt was saved by his witcher's reflexes -- the fist, instead of hitting his temple, barely grazed his head. Geralt retaliated with a blow to the torso, then lunged back into a grapple. He knew now that the newcomer was by no means a vodnik. The size and the smell didn't fit the description, instead of mud and sweet flag, there was a barely perceptible scent of rum and herbs. Both fell to the floor and rolled over it. The newcomer ended up underneath Geralt but scrambled up and struck Geralt's temple hard with his elbow. The witcher saw stars before his eyes but he did not loosen his grip, striking the man's jaw with a short swing, then again. He thought that would be enough. He was wrong. The newcomer went limp just for a second, then returned Geralt a sweeping and accurate hook. Then he grabbed Geralt's throat with both hands and began to choke him, disregarding the blows the witcher was landing blindly all over him.

Suddenly, swaying lights of lanterns flashed from everywhere, shadows danced, and the corridor swarmed with people. Hard hands seized Geralt and pulled him off his opponent. The latter also struggled in the grip of strong arms.

"Release the witcher!" roared Diego Mars. "Hold this one! And tie him up! Tie him up, I say!"

More lanterns and torches arrived, and the corridor became crowded and tight. Geralt's opponent was lifted, bound, and pressed against the wall. The witcher was surprised by the young age of the man. He did not look older than himself.

Diego Mars approached, shining a lantern on the bound man's face. The bound man squinted his eyes. He was clean-shaven, which explained the scent of spiced rum, used after shaving by fashionable gentlemen.

"Well, well," said the seneschal, not hiding his surprise. "What a surprise. Lord Count Finnegan. Here, in Thornhall. What miracle brings you here? It's a pity, my lord count, that you came without announcement. But, anyway, welcome. You four, take him. We're going upstairs. The rest disperse! Not you, witcher. You stay and come with us."

The clamour, rumble, and hubbub must have reached the upper floor, for Vrai Natteravn was waiting for them in the open doorway with a lantern in her hand, dressed in a white doctor's coat. The chamber behind her was

illuminated by several candelabra.
Mars gestured, and the guards dragged the bound man inside. The sorceress, the seneschal, and Geralt also entered.
In a large armchair with a backrest almost reaching the ceiling, sat Count Frederik Vaikinen, son of the margrave of the Lakeland March.
The count had long blond hair, curled like a maiden's, a pointed nose, and ugly squinting green eyes. A thin, naked chest peeked out from beneath the sable fur covering his shoulders, crisscrossed with bandages across both shoulders and under his arms. The young man's legs were also bare, and his left knee was also wrapped in a bandage.
Next to the armchair stood a small table, on which Geralt noticed bandages, phials, and a nickel-plated syringe. Undoubtedly, these were Vrai Natteravn's medical paraphernalia. Despite the late hour, she was evidently dressing the patient's wounds.
"Your Lordship," said Diego Mars, bowing. "I report that we have unexpectedly apprehended…"
"I see whom you have apprehended," interrupted Frederik Vaikinen. His voice was even less pleasant than the expression in his eyes.
"The noble Redfern Finnegan," continued Frederik, staring at the bound man, "has deigned to grace us with his presence. At night. Like a thief. Like a thug. Like father, like son. Theft and thuggery are, after all, family traditions of the Finnegans. But surely you did not come to see me, Redfern. It was not me you wished to see, but my sister. And could you not have come like a civilised man? During the day, with flowers and a gift? Ask for permission to visit?"
"And you…" The young man smelling of rum struggled in the guards' hands. "Would you have granted permission?"
"No," growled Count Frederik. "I would have had the dogs set on you."
"Naturally, because that is the family tradition of the Vaikinens. You are a pack of dogs!"
"Shut your trap, you son of a bitch!" shouted Frederik, rising in the armchair.
"No, you are a son of bitch, Fred! And anyway, go screw yourself."
"I'll show you…" choked the margrave's son. "I'll… I'll have you whipped soon… Like a bitch. Then I'll have you hanged on the gate… Mars! Come here!"
Diego Mars approached the count, bent down, and whispered something in his ear. Frederik Vaikinen turned red.
"What does that have to do with my father?" he shouted. "Are you trying to calm me down? Give me good advice? I don't care about your advice! Father is not here, he is in Ard Carraigh, and when he is not here, I rule! Do you understand? I rule! And I will do with this little wooer as I please!"
The seneschal bowed, saying nothing.
"You probably think," said Redfern Finnegan, "that you can scare me, Fred. Don't bother. You won't succeed."
"You think so?" Count Frederik sprang from the armchair, casting off the

sable fur from his shoulders, hobbling towards the bound man. “I’ll punch you in the face right now, Redfern! I will…”
“I forbade you to stand up,” said Vrai sharply. “You are undoing the results of the treatment and my efforts.”
“You are being far too bold, sorceress!” Frederik turned to her. “You are taking too many liberties! And you are forgetting my title! You have to address me as “Your Excellency”!”
“I see,” the sorceress replied coldly, “that I am no longer needed here. Then I shall take my leave. And I shall leave the island in the morning.”
“Godspeed. Mars, pay her.”
“There is no need. I shall settle with Margrave Sirius. I am accustomed to handling financial matters with serious people.”
Her words and departure did have some effect on the young count, for he sat down, huffed a little, but he got clearly calmer.
“Mars.”
“Yes, Your Lordship.”
“Lock Finnegan up in the dungeon. And all of you go to hell.”

****

Contrary to her declaration, Vrai Natteravn did not leave the island early in the morning. She was not ready to depart until around noon. Geralt came to the pier to say goodbye.
The sorceress adjusted the bag on her shoulder, pushed back her hair from her forehead, and looked at the sky and the seagulls. She was silent for a long time.
“The art of healing, witcher,” she finally said, not looking at him, “also has its other side. A kind of… reverse. I can alleviate joint pain, but I can also make the joints begin to ache severely. I can numb a painful tooth, but I can also make all teeth ache. I can cure someone’s hemorrhoids, but I can also cause that person feel a real hell in their arse. I can do more in that vein, you can fill in the blanks yourself. Do you know why I am telling you this?”
“No.”
“Because just a moment ago, I intended to indulge you in one of the aforementioned ways. Because I was very angry with you. You ruined my plans, jeopardised my reputation and my income. You can guess how.”
“The lovesick Count Finnegan,” he stated, not asked. “The charcoal-drawn door on the wall is your work.”
“Mine, indeed. Redfern Finnegan got into Thornhall through my teleport and planned to escape from here with his beloved. But he had the bad luck to run into an overzealous witcher. And now he is in trouble.”
“Indeed, he is.”
“And from these troubles,” Vrai Natteravn looked him directly in the eyes, “he will now be rescued by the very culprit. That is, the witcher Geralt. Don’t make faces. Should I put it plainly? You are to get Redfern out of prison. And

take him off the island."
"What?"
"You are to free Redfern," the sorceress repeated patiently. "And safely take him away."
"How?"
"Use your head."
"Oh come on… I mean… No, Vrai, I can't… One margrave already has… an animosity towards me, am I to make another my enemy and risk the wrath of his spoiled son?"
The healer shrugged.
"Besides, the royal prefect Trillo is after me, trying to dig up dirt on me… No, Vrai, absolutely not. And anyway, why me? Can't you teleport him yourself?"
"I cannot. Because it would immediately be obvious that it was me. And I have a position and prestige, I cannot risk that."
"You mean, I can do that because I have neither prestige nor position, I can be written off?"
"I did not say that."
"Vrai…"
"Geralt," she interrupted him. "Enough talk, my boat is waiting. You know what you have to do. And for that, you will have my gratitude. You will benefit from it, I guarantee."
"I will benefit greatly when they kill me here."
"Try not to get killed. Rumours that I can bring the dead back to life are exaggerated. And now, farewell."

****

Diego Mars, who had brought the appeal from the count, accompanied him to the door of the chamber. But he did not enter. He opened the door and rather unceremoniously pushed Geralt inside.
Frederik sat in his large armchair, its backrest was adorned with the march's coat of arms, two silver fish adossés. The crisscrossed bandages on his bare chest were still visible beneath the sable fur covering his shoulders. His left knee was still wrapped in a bandage.
He raised his hand, clearly signalling the witcher not to approach closer. It was unnecessary, Geralt had no intention of approaching. He stopped by the door and waited calmly. The count was not in a hurry, he was measuring Geralt with his unpleasant gaze.
"You are too young to be a witcher," he finally said. "It is difficult to guess your age, as you are a mutant, and that white hair… But it seems to me that you are somehow the same sage as me. What? I'll wager my head that we have a lot in common. You too have probably had to listen more than once that you are a snotnosed brat, that you are a whippersnapper, that you must obey your elders, that you still have much to learn, that you must grow up, blah, blah, blah… As if knowledge came with years. As if one did not see old

and foolish people."
Geralt did not comment. Frederik certainly did not expect a comment.
"You have my gratitude for Finnegan," he announced. "I will reward you for apprehending him. The guards messed up, the rogue managed to sneak in and would have been with Ludmilla… Do you know that she was all ready, dressed for the journey? She knew he would come for her. How they arranged it, I do not know. But I will find out. Well, though the plan was cunning, it failed. Thanks to you."
Frederik was silent for a moment, scratching his chest under the bandage.
"I will reward you for it, I promised. More, I will give you the opportunity to earn even more and to earn my favour. Why are you not asking what it is about? What I want to commission you for? Or have you already guessed?"
Geralt had guessed but remained silent.
"When father returns, he will free Redfern as sure as anything. And Redfern will not give up, he will not forget Ludmilla. He will seek other opportunities… That's why this must be put to an end, once and for all. I myself cannot issue such an order, father would… The devil knows if people would even listen to me… But you…"
The count straightened up.
"Tonight, Finnegan's dungeon will be open, and the guard will be withdrawn from there. You will lead him out, quietly take him to the embankment, and break his neck. Or stab him, if you prefer. Then you will dump the corpse into the lake. No one knows how he got here, no one will know how he got out. He will simply disappear."
Geralt was silent.
"Of course." Frederik reached for the secretaire, took out a bulging purse from the drawer, and placed it on the table with a clinking sound. "Of course, for the favour you have done me, something will fall into your pocket, and quite a bit. After completing the task, of course. Two hundred Novigrad crowns in gold. Have you ever seen such money at once?"
Geralt was silent.
"You are silent," the count stated, smiling nastily. "But your eyes lit up at the sight of the money! Meaning, you agree. I see, that pamphlet, that Monstrum, speaks the pure truth about you witchers. You are ready to commit any villainy for money."

****

The sailing cutter "Nihil Novi" returned from the hippocamp hunt unusually early, no later than an hour after noon. Perhaps that is why Count Frederik's friends and former fellow-students disembarked exceptionally sober. It soon became clear that they had decided to make up for it. The sounds of a merry revelry soon reached from the window-embrasure of their quarters in the tower. This time, the party was mixed-sex, for the laughter and thin squeals of women could also be heard. The count's former fellow-students had

evidently invited the kitchen staff or the laundresses.
Walking along the palisade, Geralt spotted one of the friends near the watchtower who had not joined the drinking. This was the son of a brewery owner, indicated to him by the healer as Primian Grohot. He stood leaning against the palisade, looking at the lake.
Geralt approached him.
“Are you thinking about the fact,” he began, “that it didn’t work out again today? That the hunt was unsuccessful?”
Primian Grohot hawked and spat into the water.
“Why,” he turned his head, “what is it to you?”
“To be honest, it’s none of my business. But I see that instead of rejoicing with the whole company, you are standing and looking longingly at the lake… As if, forgive me, you are not drawn to the goblet, but there, to the water, to the hunt…”
“Well, well,” sneered the brewer’s son, “what a shrewd observer you are. What if it is so? I didn’t come here, to these damned swamps, to drink, but to hunt the hippocamps. And here, instead of hunting, there is only revelry, carousing, and debauchery, you hear it yourself. Well, but if they don’t care…”
He fell silent, looking annoyed. Geralt did not press him, guessing that it was not necessary. He guessed correctly.
“Those counts and barons,” Primian Grohot muttered, gesturing with his head towards the window in the tower, “they don’t care whether we catch a hippocamp or not. The king will not give them more than they already have. What else…”
He did not finish. He looked at the witcher shrewdly.
“You wouldn’t have started this conversation,” he muttered, “if you didn’t want something, huh?”
“I would like to help. Because I reckon that help is needed.”
“What do you mean?”
“I think,” Geralt stood beside him, also leaning against the palisade, “it would be worth hiring someone who knows about monsters for the hunt. Someone who has an idea of where they live, where they feed, where they migrate… Someone who could corner them…”
Primian Grohot looked at him for a long time.
“And would it be possible,” he asked quietly, “to hire someone like that?”
“Where there is will and means,” Geralt also lowered his voice, “there is a way. But…”
“Well?”
“Hippocamps are shy creatures. A floating boozer with such a crew,” Geralt gestured with his head towards the window, “has no chance of even approaching them. Moreover…”
“Well?”
“Why sharing the reward? Let the king be grateful for the caught

hippocamp… to one person."
"I see." The brewer's son cleared his throat, looking around. "And how much… how much would such help cost me?"
"We will talk about my fee," Geralt smiled, "when we have a hippocamp on board the cutter. And now, indeed, you will have to shell out… I will tell you the reason. Provided you are ready…"
"Yes, yes," Grohot confirmed. "I am ready and willing for anything. And where there is will, there is a way, right?"

****

The night was dark, the moon was new, the sky was cloudy. That suited Geralt very well.
He cautiously left his room, taking care that the door did not creak. He silently walked down the corridor and out into the courtyard, onto the wooden pier. And he almost ran into a vodnik.
The creature shrank back, shifting from foot to foot. It bulged its eyes at Geralt and opened its frog-like maw.
Both stood still. The silence was broken by Geralt.
"Going to the kitchen, eh?"
"Brekek."
"You're a lucky bastard," the witcher muttered through his teeth. "Because I don't have time for you. Piss off."

****

He did not reach the building. Seneschal Diego Mars suddenly got in his way. Two figures wrapped in cloaks stood behind him.
The seneschal took two steps, drew his curved sabre, and wrapped his cloak around his left arm.
"Get out of my way, witcher," he hissed. "You will kill no one today. Unless it is over my dead body."
"Actually, I have no intention of killing anyone." Geralt raised his hands. "In fact, I will say the opposite."
"Explain yourself."
"First and foremost, I am not a hired assassin or a trained dog. Secondly, two hundred crowns for a murder is fuck all, not money."
"Then," the seneschal tilted his head, "you will not stand in our way?"
"I will not. Quite the contrary."
"Thank you," said Ludmilla Vaikinen melodiously, from behind the robe that hid her face.
"Thank you," Redfern Finnegan mumbled from behind the robe.
"Ha," said Diego Mars. "It may be, witcher, that we will both be hanged for this stunt, and on the same gallows. However, there is no need to worry in advance. And, damn it, let's not stand here. The young ones must be

dispatched… I have a logboat waiting for them…"
"A logboat?" Geralt smiled. "Sir Seneschal, I have a sailing cutter prepared for them."

The vast majority of people who claim violence and brutality to be repugnant and morally unacceptable, simply cannot use violence, even in self-defense, to defend their loved ones, or when it is necessary. This is called: making a virtue out of one's weakness.
Vysogota of Corvo

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

To Most Honourable
Margravine Ada Ghislain-Vaikinen
Ard Carraigh
Post restante
Sent from Ard Carraigh on the 18th day of May in the year 1230 after the Resurrection

Dearest Ada,

I hasten to inform you that our children are in no danger now. They have arrived safely at their destination, as we had arranged. Once our husbands' anger subsides, only the nuptials lie ahead. As for our grandchildren, I am sure that when they are born, the foolish feud between our houses will be merely a chapter in history, and we shall be free to rejoice in our progeny without plots or secrecy.
Our mutual acquaintance V. N. has fulfilled her promise with commendable diligence. We should soon express our gratitude in a tangible manner, as agreed. It is whispered that the happiness of our children was significantly aided by a certain young witcher, whose deeds have incited your husband's wrath. Try to calm the margrave and persuade him to abandon his pursuit of the witcher. It would not be prudent if that witcher fell into the margrave's hands: he knows too much.
With warm regards,
Persefona Finnegan

****

Redfern Finnegan turned in his saddle and waved them farewell. Ludmilla Vaikinen also looked back and blew a kiss to the witcher.
The witcher waved too. The Countess and Redfern urged their horses forward and soon vanished from sight among the trees.
"And so, love triumphs over obstacles and adversity," sighed Vrai Natteravn. "Here they are, young lovers, finally together, ready to venture into the distant world, seeking their happiness, regardless of anything and anyone."
"I think it is time for me to depart too," Geralt said, patting Roach on the neck. "Toward a world just as distant. Before, unfortunately, the both counts begin their chase after me."
"It seems to me you need not fear that," she replied.
"It seems to you?"
"Geralt," the healer looked at him gravely. "I did not act alone, I merely offered aid. Some other participants are the true players in this game. I assure you these participants will shield you and me from any consequences. If anyone would draw consequences, which seems unlikely".
"I'd like to believe that. Anyway, I prefer to finally depart."

Geralt and the fugitives left the island of Seevalk swiftly and without incidents. The helmsman, bribed by Primian Grohot, quietly guided the boat beyond the fortress gates, which had been opened by bribed watchmen. Trouble arose later when the brewer's son realised what had happened and understood that he had been duped. When the helmsman recognised Countess Ludmilla, he began to protest too. There was no choice but to resort to violence, mostly verbal. Geralt threatened Grohot with being thrown overboard, and Renfern Finnegan threatened the helmsman with a beating. The dense mist that enveloped the lake at dawn, like a cocoon, caused more difficulties. Suddenly they could not discern the western shore, the town of Tullach, the harbour, or anything at all. An unexpected salvation appeared in the form of Vrai Natteravn, waiting on the dock, her magical light piercing through the mist like a lighthouse beam.

"Vrai?"

"Yes."

"You have been waiting at the haven, guiding us with a magical signal. You had three horses ready, including one with a lady's saddle, and my own Roach. How did you know? How?"

"Let's say," Vrai Natteravn smiled, "that I placed boundless trust in you and your abilities."

"And honestly? Magic or something else?"

"Partly magic, partly something else. Before we part ways, Geralt, here is my promised token of gratitude, a gift from a grateful healer."

The object given by the enchantress was a metallic disc, roughly the size of a crown. Geralt turned it in his hand. The reverse side was completely smooth, without any markings. The obverse bore numerous symbols, embossed and engraved. None of them meant anything to Geralt. At the center of the disc there was a convex protrusion, a golden-yellow gem set into the metal.

Vrai took from beneath her shirt a pendant on a chain.

"The talisman is active, it provides one-way teleportation," she explained. "The stone on it is a heliodor, also known as golden beryl. I wear the same on my neck. May you never need my medical aid. But since you are a witcher, and this is a risky profession, if the need arises, press the stone on the talisman three times in a row. I will receive the signal and come at your call. I'll arrive swiftly, I promise."

She waved her hand, palm open, as if slicing the air. Following her gesture, a bright oval appeared out of thin air, with emptiness inside.

"Farewell, witcher," she said.

Then she vanished.

****

It rained that night, and by dawn a thick, sticky, damp fog cloaked everything. The white cobwebs covered with dew stretched across the grass and shimmered like diamond necklaces. But the weather cleared gradually, the

sun reached the forest through the foliage, birds began to sing, and somewhere deep in the forest a woodpecker began to tap.
Geralt reached a crossroads, halted his horse. Just like almost exactly a year ago, he thought. A crossroads: paths leading south, west, and north.
Only crows were missing.
He saw hoofprints of two horses on the wet sand of the southern road, indicating the direction taken by Redfern Finnegan and Ludmilla Vaikinen.
Geralt pondered, recalling.
Do not use the royal road, Preston Holt had warned him before he departed from Rocamora. The property is under surveillance, patrols guard the road, and spies wait at stations and inns.
They will report about you to the prefect, and that's what you want to avoid. Take a less-travelled eastern road, then follow the highway south through the Lakeland March. When you reach the Pontar River, cross to the left bank. Travelling along the Pontar's course, you will reach Novigrad and your cherished ocean…
To reach the Pontar, the border river between Kaedwen and Aedirn, one must head south. But it was precisely south that Redfern Finnegan and his beloved went. Perhaps they seek asylum in Aedirn, in a foreign land where no vengeful family can reach them? Who knows.
Whatever the case, Geralt thought, it's probably unwise to head south along the same trail as the fugitives. It is wiser to choose his own path.
He nudged Roach's flank with his heels and headed west from the crossroads, into the densest, wildest part of the forest.

****

The area was utterly deserted. Geralt travelled forest paths for three days and saw no sign of human presence. Once, he thought he heard distant sound of axes from the south. Another time, he smelt a faint whiff of smoke from the north.
At night, when camping, he often heard howling, he supposed it was wolves, but he was not certain.
On the fourth morning at the next crossroads he encountered a crow.

****

First, he heard it, then he saw it. And he was surprised. Instead of soaring high in the sky like it was typicl of crows, it hopped along on the ground. Only as Geralt approached did the bird croak and take flight. It perched on a pine, from which it continued to croak, plainly insulting the witcher in the language of crows for interrupting its meal.
Indeed, the crow was feeding on some remains, probably a roe deer. It had been gnawed by some other beast and little remained of the roe deer: a skull, hide, shattered and cleanly gnawed bones. Next to the carcass lay a

large, foul-smelling pile of shit.
Geralt dismounted, scanned the surroundings carefully. His suspicions were confirmed. An imprint of a large foot was visible in the sand. It was broad, spanning about a foot and a half in length.
Only one creature had such massive paws, only one creature defecated where it ate.
A wood schrat.

****

He rode slowly, alert, listening intently. The forest, as it turned out, was dangerous.
Wood schrats, humanoid monsters from the group of goblinoids, could be perilous. First of all, they travelled in hordes; secondly, they did not rely solely on their fangs and claws, although both were of formidable size. They always armed themselves with whatever they found or fabricated and knew how to wield such weapons. Thirdly, they were always hungry, attacking anything they could eat, including humans.
At the next crossroads the forest path was crossed by a larger road. A signpost stood there. A pole bore a plaque with the Kaedwen emblem, a unicorn, and an ornate trumpet entwined with a decorative cord. The unmistakable message: the road was a postal route, and the signpost was a distance marker, informing the courier that only a mile separated him from the next post.
Geralt saw fresh hoofprints of a galloping horse on the road. A postman had recently passed through. He could not be far ahead.
Indeed, he wasn't. Geralt heard the sound of a brass trumpet, a desperate call for help.
He urged Roach into a full gallop.

****

Suddenly, a clearing burst into view among the trees. The witcher heard a frantic trumpet sound mixed with a wild neighing from there.
Geralt drew his sword, leant over Roach's mane, and charged into the clearing at a gallop.
Four shaggy schrats swarmed over a fallen horse, they tore open its belly and were devouring it alive. The horse whinnied and shook its head.
On a branch of the solitary oak tree in the middle of the clearing, a young man lay half-upright, blowing into a brass trumpet with all his might. Two schrats tried to reach him, one climbed onto the other's shoulders, attempting to claw at the young man.
Geralt charged at the monsters eating the horse in full gallop. He swung his sword in a swift slash, decapitating one with a clean blow, then he ran into the others, under the oak tree — one was cleft, another knocked over. He

jumped off the horse and faced the others rushing toward him with savage roars and snarling fangs. One wielded a bludgeon, another a rusty sword, the third a homemade gisarme — a hammered sheet of metal attached onto a pole, torn from a milepost.

The witcher deftly sidestepped the first, slashed its throat with a swift blow, and, surprisingly calm and collected, parried another schrat's blow, stabbing it in the temple. He dodged a whistling blow from the homemade gisarme, spun around the schrat, and struck him in the nape. The monster collapsed to its knees. Geralt aimed for the head, and it rolled away among the ferns.

Turning toward the schrat under the oak, Geralt saw that the creature had already retreated. Geralt only caught a flash of its rear end as the schrat hurriedly jumped over a windfallen tree.

He noted, with satisfaction, that his breathing had not quickened.

"Stop blowing."

The young man atop the oak lowered the horn from his lips.

"You can come down now. It's over."

The young man slid down or rather fell from the tree. He got down on all fours, shivering, and began to retch tensely, never letting go off the trumpet in his hand.

"Thanks for saving me," he mumbled. "I… My… A thousand thanks…"

"Let's get out of here," Geralt interrupted. "Before the schrats return in greater numbers."

"My horse…"

"Your horse is beyond help now."

The youth saw what the schrats did to his mount and doubled over, retching again.

"We'll ride together on my mare," Geralt said, wiping his sword with a tuft of grass. "Come on, let's move."

"The mail!" blurted out the youth. "I have mail in the saddlebags! I am a royal courier! The mail must… be delivered…"

He actually had a royal courier gorget with an image of a trumpet entwined with a cord, the same as on the milepost, dangling from his chest.

"Well, then wipe the blood off the mail and take it. And let's depart quickly."

****

"There's no way," gasped the postmaster. "There's no way, young sir, that you should be left without recompense. How is it possible? We would be ungrateful, unforgivably ungrateful. Please, accept this, I beg of you. All of us contributed — myself, the couriers, the stable boys… Everyone chipped in a few marks…"

"I am a witcher," Geralt repeated patiently. "I accept payment when I am hired, according to the agreement. But if I run into someone in distress, if I am merely rushing to help a person threatened with death, I do not take money for it."

Before they reached the post house, Geralt and the rescued courier travelled together more than four miles astride Roach, passing successive distance markers that indicated the way. At the post house, the courier gave a vivid and beautifully detailed account of the event, praising and extolling Geralt's courage and valour to the skies. The post house staff rewarded the witcher with applause, cheers, and hearty slaps on the back, and, naturally, with a generous mug of beer.

The dignified, robust, rosy-cheeked, and bowlegged postmaster organised a whip-round among the staff and stubbornly tried to present Geralt with a purse containing the collected sum. He was disheartened when Geralt refused to accept the money.

"There's no way," he repeated, shifting from one crooked leg to the other, "It cannot be that you leave without a reward. You saved the life of a courier, young sir witcher. Indeed, more importantly, you saved the mail. And the mail must reach its destination, it must! We, the royal couriers, cannot leave your deed unrewarded. If you refuse coins, well… Perhaps I can offer you a meal instead? Or groom your horse?"

Geralt did not refuse this offer. Soon, he was seated in the kitchen, wholly absorbed in a hearty meal of sour rye soup with sausages, the first warm meal since his stay in Seevalk, inhaling the scent of a pike being fried for him. Meanwhile, the stable boys eagerly set about tending Roach with brushes, currycombs and hoof picks. They meticulously brushed the mare's tail, for according to an ancient equestrian superstition, an unbrushed tail would bring misfortune to the rider.

As Geralt finished his meal, the postmaster appeared again.

"As a token of your bravery," he announced proudly, presenting Geralt with a badge depicting a trumpet, "we have decided to appoint you, noble witcher, as an honorary royal courier. When you display this insignia, every station and every courier will assist you."

"Thank you very much," Geralt said, adjusting his girth and saddlebags. "Farewell…"

"Hold on, hold on," called out a tall, dust-covered courier, who had recently arrived at the post house. "Aren't you the witcher they call Geralt? If so, I have a message for you!"

****

The valley between the hills drowned in white and pink flowers. The trees were blooming — apple trees, dozens, if not hundreds of apple trees planted in even rows and ranks, as orderly as an army in formation. The road through the orchard, even and hard-packed, led to the buildings, several large wooden buildings.

Something like a gate towered over the road, two posts with a crossbar. An inscription was burned into the crossbar:

Geralt had a lot of reasons to dismiss the message brought by the dusty courier at the station. Actually, it should have served as a warning, an alarm. The mere fact that someone knew him, knew his destination, and his whereabouts in this vicinity was enough to raise suspicion. Moreover, it was plausible that, as a result of his recent exploits, this someone might not harbour friendly intentions.

But the most ordinary curiosity won. Instead of running away as far as the eye can see, as he should have done, Geralt rode in the indicated direction. And after two days of riding, he reached his destination: a valley drowning in white and pink flowers, a gate with a strange inscription, and a heraldic shield below it.

A shield with three legless birds. Heraldic martlets.

This should also have been a warning. And again he should have run away. But once again curiosity won.

A few people were hanging around by the buildings, none of them paid any attention to him. The yard was full of barrels, large vats stacked in piles, and strange machines looking like presses.

Geralt tied Roach to a barrier, looked around, and walked on.

There was a table on the initially invisible, sunny side of one of the buildings, right next to the rows of apple trees, next to another stack of barrels and next to the woodshed. A man sat there, absorbed in leafing through documents.

When Geralt approached, the man turned his head in his direction. He put down the document he was reading and picked up a short wand from the table.

“You are armed,” the man stated, pointing the wand at Geralt. “You have a sword on your back, hidden under your cloak. But please don’t try to draw it. I wouldn’t want to resort to anything radical.”

The man was dressed in a fashionable richly embroidered purple doublet, braided at the front with metallic thread, fastened with silver clasps, with a high stiff collar, from under which the pleated ruff of his shirt peeked out. His hair was long, dark, only slightly sprinkled with grey, his eyebrows were thick and fused into a single line at the bridge of his nose.

The irises of his eyes were like polished metal, shiny, like a mirror.

“My message has reached you,” the man stated again. “I am glad you have accepted the invitation.”

“It’s the first truly warm day of this spring, I think,” he added, not waiting for an answer. “And I like to be here in Xendell, in spring, in my estate, my Garden of Delights. Do you know, young witcher, where this name comes from?”

“The trees you see,” he continued his monologue in a soft, almost velvet voice, “are apple trees. They are blooming now, and in the fall they will bend

under the weight of apples. From these apples, through the art of master winemakers and distillers, something will be created that gives the local population the greatest, albeit uncomplicated, delights: cider. As well as the much stronger alcohol distilled from it. In barrels and kegs it will be delivered to the market, for, as they said, the delight of the people. Well, it's time to introduce myself. I am Artamon of Asguth. A sorcerer, Dean of the Academy of Magic in Ban Ard."

"Geralt. Witcher."

"Yes, I know. I have been wanting to meet you for almost a year. And there are two reasons I sent out invitations for you all over the area. The first is my gratitude. For I am grateful to you, young witcher."

Geralt raised his eyebrows.

"Margravine Deianira, Margrave Luitpold Lindenbrog's wife, is my relative. Thus, Deianira's daughter, Herzeloide, is my relative too. Because of you, they could have been harmed. Because of you, that didn't happen."

"I don't know what you're talking about, sir."

"Well, well. Modest, and discreet to boot. And what about Ludmilla Vaikinen and young Count Finnegan? Will you deny the help you gave them?"

News travels fast, Geralt thought. Sure. Magic, gossip, and carrier pigeons.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he repeated.

"Fortunately," Artamon smiled, "I do. And it's time to move on to the second reason for my invitation. That will require an introduction, a somewhat lengthy one. Arm yourself with patience."

Geralt armed himself.

"You're a witcher," the sorcerer began after a long moment. "A mutant. Created as a result of a process that seemed to someone as an improvement, as a correction of Nature. But Nature cannot be corrected, or modified. Any manipulation of what Nature has created means pathology. Corruption and destruction. Depravity. Who, if not you, must remember the Beann Grudd citadel and the aberration that was created there? The infamous Cats? Psychopathic murderers? It's hard to fool Nature, young witcher. Like an organism fighting a disease, Nature treats every metamorphosis and mutation as a pathogen, as a disease-causing factor, and rightly so. And it fights it with all its might. Nature, forgive the pun, is decidedly against the unnatural."

Sure, thought Geralt. And you, sorcerer with a seal with birds, helped nature as much as you could. Kaer Morhen, where witchers dwell, is to be wiped off the face of the earth, and every trace of it sprinkled with salt and saltpeter. A quote from your work, right?

"And so," Artamon continued, clasping his hands, "on the one hand we have Cats, the result of Nature's insult. At the other hand we have you, the result of something opposite. You, Geralt, are the best example of what I was talking about. In your case, Nature is beginning to win the fight against the pathogen. In you, the righteousness and empathy are revived, which the

witchers' mutation was supposed to completely eradicate. That's why I sent out the invitations. Because I want to make you an offer. A request that I could not make to any ordinary witcher. But I will not hesitate to make an offer to a righteous man, one who did not harm two women, even though he could, and as a witcher even should, have harmed. An empathetic man, who helped a couple in love, even though he could have simply shrugged and looked away."
"Let's move on *ad rem*." The sorcerer straightened up in the wicker chair. "I would like you to visit me at the Academy in Ban Ard. In my laboratory, where I would perform some tests. I would take samples. It would cost you nothing, except maybe a few drops of blood. And maybe a bit of other… secretions. As a scientist, I am very interested in what happens to your blood, and your entire body, after taking the elixirs."
Geralt was silent.
"As compensation for your time," Artamon continued. "I would provide a tangible benefit, a specific sum. No less than what Lindenbrog offered you for the striga. In addition, I would guarantee your immunity. The royal prefect would leave you alone and stop bothering you."
"Consider also," the sorcerer was not concerned about Geralt's silence, "the intangible benefits. The effect of my research would be the production of medicines, drugs for the incurable diseases that plague mankind today. You already have my gratitude for Deianira and her daughter. Think of the gratitude of all mankind. Good deeds come back to you, young witcher. That's the way it is."
"You don't have to decide right away. Think it over. And when you do, come visit me in Ban Ard."

****

Geralt was already in the saddle, but before he could ride away, three horsemen appeared in the yard. All three were armed to the teeth, riding war horses. Two of the men wore leather brass-studded jackets, there was also a woman in a men's black jerkin. The woman had a flaxen braid, a lot of freckles around her snub nose, thin lips, and green eyes with an exceptionally hideous expression.
Predatory lizards nested in the cracks of Kaer Morhen's walls. The woman's face closely resembled them.
"Who's that again?" she growled, staring at Geralt.
The second horseman, a big fellow, also took a closer look. His nose was distorted, crooked, as if it had healed badly after some injury.
"Leave it, Meritxell." He leaned down in the saddle and spat. "It's a mail courier. Don't you see the plate with the trumpet?"

****

Geralt didn't reach the gate with a charming inscription. He stopped Roach among the blossoming apple trees.
Never before, not even during the clash with the weazl, not even during the dance with the striga, had he had such a feeling of peril, had he sensed such danger. Artamon's velvet voice rang in his ears. He remembered the lizard eyes of the freckled woman.
He jumped down from the saddle.

****

"…evidence," Artamon said. Gralt couldn't be seen behind the woodshed. He was surprised at how much his voice had changed. There was no longer a trace of velvet in it. There was gravel and crushed glass.
"Estevan Trillo da Cunha disappointed me, he completely let me down on. But I will do without evidence, I do not need it. I know who murdered wachtmeister Margulies and the others. And I will not wait for the law to finally wake up. I will take the matter into my own hands."
"As for Preston Holt, you will proceed as follows: he has health problems, and a doctor from Ban Fillim is often called to Rocamora, his estate. Sometimes the doctor does not go there himself, but sends one of his students or lackeys with medicine. One of the gentlemen, let's say Mr. Beauregard Frick, will take on this role. But instead of medicine, he will deliver to Holt something that I will prepare. Something that will cause the witcher to die after a long and painful agony… Are you shaking your head, Sir Frick? Why?"
"Master, this witcher is neither kith nor kin to me, I don't give a damn about him. But he's a man of the sword, he has to die by the sword… And to poison him, like some rat…"
"First of all, Holt is a rat. And he deserves a rat's death. Secondly, I doubt that even all three of you could handle him with swords. Yes, yes, Sir Frick, I know your fencing mastery, but Holt is nobody's fool, an old and experienced witcher, and you are ordinary people. Thirdly and most importantly: Holt's death cannot be associated in any way with me or with the marquise, whom you serve. And your trio is associated with us. So you will do as I ordered. Do you understand?"
"As you order."
"That's what I expected. And now to the matter of the temple in Elsborg, the place where witchers are educated, hospitalised and supported in every possible way. My efforts finally yielded results and the local authorities decided to evict and deport the priestesses. But that's not enough. We must have it out with them once and for all. Since, let me remind you, nothing can point to me or the marquise, you will use a similar trick as you did in Novigrad. Remember, Mrs. Meritxell?"
"I remember." Geralt heard the voice of a lizard. "I remember, master."
"The most important priestesses are Assumpta and Nenneke. The fact that both are hated by some of the local population for the medical care they

provide to women will make things easier. Mrs. Meritxell will therefore take on the role of a woman wishing to terminate an unwanted pregnancy and will head for the temple for the procedure, accompanied by her lover, played by Mr. Cibor Ponti. At the first opportunity, Mrs. Meritxell and Mr. Ponti will stab the priestesses. Before they withdraw, they will raise loud cries about divine law, protection of holy life and the like, the more absurd the better. No one will doubt their motive, because the priestesses have been threatened with death more than once or twice for their activities. Mrs. Meritxell, Mr. Ponti, any objections?"
"None, Master." A booming voice, probably the one with the crooked nose. "We will do as you order."
Geralt felt shivers in his hiding place. He didn't know if it was the effect of the elixir or sheer rage.
"As for the rest of the priestesses and adepts from Elsborg, it would be best to make them all cease to exist at once, all together. As far as I know, they intend to migrate to Temeria, to their new abode. This will require a ferry crossing over the Pontar. We will have to cause a small incident. The ferry with all the priestesses must sink somewhere in the depth in the middle of the river. I leave that to your ingenuity, gentlemen."
"Sure, master. And what…"
"Yes, Mrs. Meritxell?"
"What about that young witcher, Holt's lackey? Mrs. Marquise Graffiacane mentioned…"
"Refrain from names, Mrs. Meritxell! Please watch your words and do not mention that name ever anywhere. What about the young witcher? He's a funny, naive boy. But you don't have to worry about him anymore. He's as good as gone. I invited him to Ban Ard under the pretext of conducting research. I didn't explain…"
Artamon snorted, laughed screechingly and nastily.
"I didn't explain to him that it involves his vivisection."

****

Punishing crimes is the business of the district head and the court, Geralt repeated mentally, hiding behind the woodshed. The business of the district head and the court, but I…
Holt.
Mother Assumpta.
Nenneke.
Priestesses.
Geralt squeezed the key given to him by Holt in his fist.
No, I will not wait for the law to finally wake up.
Good things come back to you.
The same law applies to evil things.

****

Bees were buzzing among the apple trees.
Meritxell and her company drove off. The people in the yard had stopped banging their barrels, they were obviously taking a lunch break. Artamon of Asguth, a sorcerer, dean of the Academy of Magic in Ban Ard, dozed off over his papers. Awakened by a rustle, he opened his eyes and saw the witcher. He grabbed his wand. He was fast, but he was no match for the witcher who had taken an elixir. Geralt hit him with a lightning-fast left jab of his fist straight to the throat. The sound of the blow was soft, but the effect was immediate. Artamon grabbed his neck with both hands, but he couldn't make a sound, his larynx was crushed, and his windpipe was blocked. He was completely helpless and was already slowly suffocating, but Geralt didn't intend to stop or wait. With the key clenched in his right fist he struck the sorcerer with all his might on the side of the neck, just below the lobe of the left ear. Artamon fell like a log on his back. Both hands were still clutching his neck. He screeched. He kicked his legs. Then he froze.
He was dead.

Who killed Cock Robin?
I, said the Sparrow,
with my bow and arrow,
I killed Cock Robin.
Who saw him die?
I, said the Fly,
with my little teeny eye,
I saw him die.

Tommy Thumb's *Pretty Song Book*, a collection of nursery rhymes from 1744

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

To the Prefect
Esteemed Estevan Trillo da Cunha
to Ard Carraigh
Written in Daevon, 4th day of May in the year 1230 after the Resurrection

Sir Prefect,
I inform you that I arrived in Xendell on the 3rd of May together with the starost of Daevon and began the examination on the spot. I found that Master Artamon of Asguth had been dead, as indicated by *rigor mortis*, for over a day. A precise diagnosis and determination of the cause of death without an autopsy was not possible. However, I discovered symptoms on the body that may indicate violent death and the participation of third parties, that is, *crimen homicidio*. I found haemorrhages on the neck of the deceased, a possible effect of a strong blow. Petechiae on the eyeballs and on the skin of the face, as well as cyanosis, may indicate fractures of the laryngeal cartilages and suffocation. But, *iterum dicimus*, without an autopsy, this cannot be unequivocally confirmed.
Respectfully yours,
Eldardus Thiry, *medicus et adiunct judicalis comitatus Daevoniae*

****

To His Lordship Prefect
Estevan Trillo da Cunha
to Ard Carraigh
from Daevon, on the 7th of May, in the 9th year of the reign of His Highness King Miodrag

Your Lordship Sir Prefect,
I inform you that on the 6th of May I arrived at the apple orchard in Xendell and, as you ordered, immediately began the investigation. I report the facts below:
At the time of the crime eleven seasonal *laboratores* and one supervisor were working in the orchard. When questioned, they all pleaded complete ignorance, because they were busy cleaning barrels and vats before the distilling season, and they had neither seen nor heard anything from behind the vats. The supervisor allegedly said that, I quote, there was a shitload of work, and he, I quote again, had a schedule as tight as ram's balls. No matter how hard I pressed them, they kept saying the same: they saw nothing, they heard nothing. Nevertheless there was a boy, a rather silly little boy, to be honest, who remembered that the murdered sorcerer had visitors, three horsemen, two men and a woman, shortly before his death. These fellows ordered their horses to be guarded, while they themselves went to the sorcerer and spent with him some time. Then they rode away, and as they

were leaving, they gave the boy a slap on the ears, gods only know why. The boy remembered that they called one of them “Zibor” and the other “Bo”.
I beg for your instructions for further action,
Your Lordship Sir Prefect’s humble servant,
Ulf Markhor, special agent of the Crown

****

To His Lordship
Estevan Trillo da Cunha
Prefect of the Guard
to Ard Carraigh
from Ban Fearg, May 28, 1230 after the Resurrection

My dear Estevan!
It turned out that Artamon of Asguth had been snuffed out. I don’t know how it is in your capital, but in Ban Fearg and the marches, when the news spread, many more people are happy with his death rather than sad. The sorcerer’s various businesses and the way he runs them have earned him quite a few enemies. I wouldn’t be surprised if it was one of Artamon’s competitors who paid him back for his dishonest tricks, or even frauds and swindles. I wouldn’t rule out any of his confreres from the academy in Ban Ard either, the famous scholar and experimenter was open to stealing impudently other people’s ideas and patents.
However, I have a different suspicion. You mentioned in your letter three people, the last ones to see Artamon before his death. Well, I know what kind of people they are, though the term “people” does not fit them at all. The aforementioned “Zibor” is undoubtedly Cibor Ponti, a bandit wanted in Kovir on arrest warrants. That “Bo” is none other than Beauregard Frick, a hired thug, who also has numerous convictions. If we are dealing with these two, then the third person is undoubtably a certain Meritxell, suspected of numerous crimes, including a brutal murder. Now comes the fun part: all three are secretly in Cervia Herrada’s, the dowager marquise Graffiacane, service.
It is well-known that an amorous and supposedly very hot affection connected the dowager marquise with the murdered sorcerer. Nevertheless, it cannot be overlooked that the dowager marquise has been a messed up old woman for a long time and is probably approaching a hundred years. And you know the saying: silk won’t help an old hag. I do not rule out that Artamon, bored with the old woman, flashed his eyes at some young wench, and as another saying goes: hell has no fury like a woman scorned. If the marquise had decided to take revenge, she would have had Frick, Ponti and Meritxell at her beck and call. I would advise that this threesome be investigated.
So much for my advice, Estevan,

May you stay healthy, strong and cheerful,
Martin van Creveld, private detective

****

To His Excellency
Abelard Levesley, Count de Bauhin
the Lord Prosecutor of the Crown
to Ard Carraigh
From the palace Graffiacane, 5th June, 1230 after the Resurrection

Your High Nobleness, most venerable Lord Prosecutor,
I present this petition on behalf of Her Excellency the Dowager Marquise Cervia Herrada de Graffiacane. Her Excellency the Dowager Marquise kindly requests that Your High Nobleness the Lord Instigator and Lord Prefect da Cunha's minions cease to visit and harass her. The Marquise is in mourning and is strongly against being questioned. She also demands to put an end to fictitious suspicions and investigations against her courtiers and employees. The Marquise considers such investigations to be slanderous harassment. Lady Marquise expressed the wish that Prefect da Cunha and his men would finally focus their activity properly and deal with the actual criminals, such as the witcher Preston Holt of Rocamora near Ban Fillim.
I wish to inform you on behalf of the dowager marquise that in case of non-fulfillment of her request and further harassment, legal action will be taken.
Yours faithfully,
Nachtigall Visser, counsel, legal advisor to the Graffiacane family

****

to Prefect of the Guard
Estevan Trillo da Cunha
local letter
written in Ard Carraigh, 10th day of June in the year 1230 after the Resurrection

Lord Prefect,
I order that the investigation against the Dowager Marquise Cervia Herrada de Graffiacane and her employees be discontinued immediately and that any activities therewith be ceased. I order the investigation to include a certain Preston Holt, a witcher, from the Rocamora estate near Ban Fillim.
Abelard Levesley,
the Lord Prosecutor of the Crown

****

To His Lordship

Estevan Trillo da Cunha
Prefect of the Guard
to Ard Carraigh
written in Ban Fillim, on July 7, the year 1230

Your Lordship Sir Prefect,
I hasten to inform you of what has happened. On July 5 of this year a certain Preston Holt appeared in the Ban Fillim starost's office. He introduced himself as a witcher and announced that, I quote, he surrendered himself to justice, because his conscience was tormenting him after a premeditated murder of a sorcerer named Artamon of Asguth and three other men named Margulies, Nourred, and Chwalba. So I asked him why he had done this to those people, why he had murdered them. And he said that he did not like them. However, later he confessed that the aforementioned three men had attacked the witchers' fort with weapons and killed many witchers about thirty years ago, and it was the sorcerer Artamon who had incited them and sent them to do this. Then he, the witcher Holt, swore revenge and finally took it. But he is aware that these crimes have defiled his soul and burdened his conscience severely, so he confesses his guilt and surrenders himself to the law for trial and punishment. These are his exact words.
I ordered without delay that this witcher be imprisoned and dispatched under escort to Sturefors prison, in the hope that I am doing the right thing.
I commend myself to your never-failing grace,
Respectfully yours,
Yon Bervoets,
starost

****

To His Excellency
Abelard Levesley, Count de Bauhin
the Lord Prosecutor of the Crown
written in Ban Ard, on August 1, the year 1230 after the Resurrection

Your Excellency Lord Prosecutor,
with regard to that witcher called Preston Holt, imprisoned in Sturefors, guilty of murdering our dear Brother and Friend Master Artamon of Asguth, we, the Academy of Magical Arts in Ban Ard, hereby make it public:
Our Master and Condisciple, Adrian of Tallema, an expert in both jurisprudence and penal sciences, ruled that the witcher is not a human being, but a mutant and does not have the right to a trial. The fundamental right of personal inviolability *nisi iure victum* is a human right, not a mutant's, therefore a trial is completely unnecessary. Since the guilt is unquestionable, execution can be fulfilled immediately without convening a court. That was Adrian of Tallema's proposition.

However, guided by the sense of justice, we decided that since the *auctor* of the crime has two hands, two legs and is capable of communicating with human speech, then although this may not make him a human being *ex definitione*, it is appropriate to allow such a person to benefit from certain human rights. *Nullus describatur reus, priusquam convincatur*, thetherefore the said Preston Holt should be brought before the court and judged. We, however, agree with Master Adrian's opinion that this was a *crimen nefandum*, and that Holt's guilt is beyond doubt. *Nec veniam effuso sanguine casus habet*. Therefore there can be no leniency and there can only be one sentence: *ultimum supplicium*, or *poena capitalis*. The Academy of Magical Arts will not accept or acknowledge any other sentence. The sentence must be carried out as soon as possible.
Respectfully yours,
Euclides Croft
Rector Academiae

****

Prefaectus vigilium
Estevan Trillo da Cunha
local letter
written in Ard Carraigh, 6th day of August in the year 1230 after the Resurrection

Sir Prefect,
I am enclosing a copy of a letter from His Magnificence Euclides Croft, Dean of the Academy in Ban Ard. I recommend you to read and *diligenter procedere* with the case of the witcher imprisoned in Sturefors. That is, judge and execute him without any ceremony and inform me about the execution.
Abelard Levesley
the Lord Prosecutor of the Crown

If I must die,
I will encounter darkness as a bride,
And hug it in mine arms.

William Shakespeare
Measure for Measure, Act 3, Scene 1.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The royal prefect of the guard Estevan Trillo da Cunha sat at a table and looked piercingly at Geralt for a long time, narrowing his eyes and slightly biting his lips. Finally, he straightened up in his chair and curled his black moustache.

"Well, well, well," he drawled. "My agents have been searching for you throughout the kingdom for some time now without success. And to my surprise and admiration, you have appeared here on your own. Voluntarily. Without escort."

Geralt shrugged. He had no intention of revealing to the prefect where he had been recently and what he had been doing. And it was a busy time. After the event on the first of May, Geralt decided to get as far away from the place of that event as possible and as quickly as possible. He headed to the Lower March, to the Pontar River. The badge with a trumpet and the title of honorary royal postal carrier proved to be extraordinarily effective there. The royal postmen, as it turned out, were bound by a really amazing solidarity. At each postal station that Geralt visited, he received support and assistance. And since he wanted to hide his personality for a while, the postmen from the Lower March were quick to offer him a job, and for the last three months Geralt had been accompanying the postmen carrying the most valuable parcels as an escort.

The dwarven bankers also showed solidarity, discernment, and an efficient communication system. When Geralt, escorting the postmen, appeared at the branch of the Bonich family bank, there was a message from Timur Voronoff waiting for him there. That's how Geralt learned of Preston Holt's arrest and of his imprisonment in the terrifying Sturefors prison, a place of isolation and hard labour in the quarries.

"I could bet," the prefect twirled his moustache again, "that I know the purpose of your arrival. But we won't bet, because, as we know, out of the two people who bet, one is stupid and the other is dishonest. So just tell me what brings you here, to Sturefors. I will decide whether I let you go or whether you stay in prison forever. I am listening, speak."

Shouts and insults could be heard from the courtyard, from behind the barred window. When you approach Sturefors prison, the first thing you see from a distance, is the *Aedificium carceris*, a large edifice, a block of stone towering over the lowland area. What the edifice used to be and what it was used for, no one remembered. It was thought that it was a temple.

When you approach closer, a narrow road leads you to a quarry located in a ravine. Here one could observe a group of ragged and shackled prisoners, splitting blocks of rock with hammers and pickaxes. One couldn't look for long, passers-by were forced to hurry past the quarry by the menacing shouts and even more menacing faces of the mounted crossbowmen guarding the prisoners.

Further on there was a high palisade and a gate with a guardhouse, where

anyone arriving at Sturefors had to report to the guards about the purpose of their arrival. Then you had to wait, usually for a very vong time, for permission to enter.

From the guardhouse the road led straight to the *Aedificium*, between two palisades, high enough that even from the height of the saddle you couldn't see what was behind them. However, some people knew that there were wooden barracks there, places where sentences for minor and medium-degree crimes were served. Those convicted of more serious offences were kept in stone cells in the main building. This was also where the prison administration, guard quarters and warehouses were located.

Geralt didn't like the grim room he was led into. He didn't like the iron hook hanging from the ceiling, its purpose was obvious. Or the fact that the chair he was told to sit on was fixed to the floor.

"I'm waiting," Estevan Trillo da Cunha urged Geralt. "Speak."

"You have a prisoner here," Geralt cleared his throat, "Preston Holt, a witcher."

"The identity of our prisoners," the prefect said after a moment, when it became clear that Geralt would not add anything, "is a state secret."

"He is imprisoned for killing the sorcerer Artamon of Asguth."

"That is also a state secret."

"Hold has been unjustly imprisoned. He is innocent. He did not kill the sorcerer. I did."

"You? Really? And what would your motive be?"

"Artamon was the author of that lampoon that in the year one hundred and ninety-four incited the mob to attack Kaer Morhen, our headquarters…"

"And that was enough for you?"

"He also planned to poison Holt and murder the priestesses of Elsborg. I had to prevent that."

Estevan Trillo da Cunha was silent for a while, tapping his fingers on the hourglass standing before him. The sand in the hourglass has run out, but the prefect did not turn it over. He was clearly not interested in measuring the passage of time.

"In other words," he finally said, "you needed to kill a man for his literary work and intentions. Congratulations. You have just taken a high place on my private list of idiotic motives. But I hate to tell you, young witcher Geralt. You are not trustworthy. Your confession is not trustworthy. The audience is over. Leave Sturefors."

"I killed the sorcerer. I can ultimately prove it."

"Really? Ultimately how?"

"I can describe exactly how I killed him. It must have been discovered during the examination of the body."

"It must have been discovered," the prefect nodded in confirmation. "And indeed it was."

"I hit him in his throat…"

“In the laryngeal prominence, known to medics as *prominentia laryngea*,” the prefect finished, interrupting Geralt. “But since you didn’t want him to suffer from suffocating, you finished him off with a blow to the neck, to the mastoid process, which caused the rupture of the vertebral artery. Right?”
Geralt fell silent.
“Holt precisely described to us the way he murdered Artamon of Asguth,” the prefect continued dispassionately. “And the autopsy confirmed it. And you, well, you had to know how Holt killed, you knew his *modus operandi*. Stop trying to save him now, taking the crime upon yourself. Three cheers for your admirable dedication and loyalty, boy. However, your loyalty is futile. Your confession, which by the way has no force of proof, is of no use to us, we already have the guilty party. The verdict has been passed, the execution will take place today.”
“Today?”
“Yes, today.”
“You are killing an innocent person!”
“Don’t raise your voice, witcher. Preston Holt, alias Zjawa Reyndert, surrendered to the authorities. He voluntarily and without coercion admitted his offence. Or rather, offences. He confessed to the murders of Otto Margulies, Kari Nourred, and Remek Chwalba, of which, as you know, I had long suspected him. He also confessed to the murder of Artamon of Asguth. *Confessio est regina probationum*, confession of guilt is the queen of evidence. The court could not have and did not have doubts. Preston Holt was tried and convicted, he faces execution. Law and justice are satisfied, we need nothing more.”
“I repeat, it was not Holt who killed Artamon, it was me. I confess. So confession is vagina and so on. Arrest me and release Holt.”
Estevan Trillo da Cunha watched him silently. Quite for a long time.
“The law,” he finally said, “or more precisely Kaedweni prosecutor of the crown and the sorcerers of Ban Ard need the execution of a real witcher. A master, not his apprentice. One sentence and one execution will be more than enough. The law is not bloodthirsty. Neither am I. After Holt’s execution, I will consider that justice has been done…”
“Some justice it is.”
“Come on. Accept it and realise that you will not save Holt, even if you tear your robes and howl at the moon. I described the problem to you back then, in October last year, when we first met. Holt surrendered himself to justice. The machine started and put him in gears from which his only way out is to the scaffold. It is irrevocable and inevitable. And the execution will take place shortly. The guests have already arrived in Sturefors, those who wished to be present at the execution. Those who need the execution.”
Geralt was silent, gritting his teeth.
“You, on the other hand,” the prefect continued, “may leave in peace. However, I advise against further loud and broad admissions and confessions

of your alleged deeds. Because it may have a deplorable…"
"I want," Geralt interrupted sharply, "to see Holt."
"Agreed," said Estevan Trillo da Cunha, taking Geralt completely by surprise.

****

Preston Holt didn't look his best. His white hair fell over his forehead and eyes like an unkempt mane. An unhealthy pallor, sunken cheeks, and abnormally prominent cheekbones completed the picture. On top of all that, his left cheek and eye socket bore the trace of a large, but old and yellow bruise.
"It's a local tradition," said Estevan Trillo da Cunha dispassionately, seeing Geralt's evil gaze. "Nothing personal."
"Nothing personal," confirmed Holt, sitting down on the bench. "Well, they punched me in the face. It's a tradition."
"I'm leaving you alone." The prefect finally turned the hourglass on the table. "For a short while. And I hope that nothing stupid crosses your minds. I warn you, you are under guard."
Holt followed the leaving man with his gaze. Then he fixed his festering eyes on Geralt.
"Can you imagine," he sighed, "I demanded the last meal of a condemned man which I am entitled to. And they said that would be pearl barley with sauce. I ate pearl barley with sauce yesterday, and I said so. And they said I would have it tomorrow too. Budget cuts. Well, that's…"
"Holt," Geralt interrupted sharply. "They are going to take your life."
"I know, I know," the old witcher waved his hand. "I was there when the judge put on his black cap and announced the sentence."
They were silent, looking at the sand in the hourglass.
"I thought," Holt finally said, "you were wiser. I thought you had grown up. And you, as it turns out, are still a naive snotnose and a sucker. Why the hell did you come here, huh?"
Geralt shrugged.
"I can guess why."
Geralt shrugged again.
"Unlike you," Holt continued, "I knew what I was doing, and I was aware of the consequences. I acted according to a plan. That plan did not include your pathetic, senseless and purposeless intervention."
"I wanted to save you…"
"And I wanted to save you," Holt snarled. "But I was the first to think of it, and I don't need imitators. And you show up and want to ruin everything."
"I'm sorry," Geralt replied. "It won't happen again."
They both burst out laughing at the same time. It was hardly appropriate under the circumstances.
"Da Cunha," Holt wiped away a tear, "does he have anything on you? Apart from your stupid confession? Will they let you out of here?"

“I think so. The prefect didn’t believe my confession.”
“I wouldn’t be so sure. But officially they already have the culprit and the verdict, there’s no way to turn that around. If they revealed another culprit now, they would completely compromise themselves, all parties involved. Da Cunha, the royal instigator’s underlings, but above all…”
“The sorcerers from Ban Ard?”
“Now you are using your head.”
They were silent for a moment.
“Holt?”
“What?”
“Why… Why did you confess? Why did you take it upon yourself…”
“A certain man,” Preston Holt interrupted, “once spotted a hornet’s nest in an old tree stump in the forest. He came close and kicked the stump hard a few times. Then they asked him why he did it. And he said…”
“What?”
“That at the time it seemed like a great idea. Geralt, the sand in the hourglass is about to run out. Listen: Voronoff has both my swords and my medallion. Send them to Kaer Morhen. The rest, including Rocamora, has been confiscated. Will you be at the execution?”
“I will.”

****

Unlike the usual city scaffolds, the one in the courtyard of Sturefors prison was tiny. Of course, the scaffolds used for city executions had to be large and spacious, after all they had to accommodate the entire arsenal of devices and machines necessary for the sometimes very inventive and varied infliction of suffering and death. There isn’t much inventiveness in the scaffold in Sturefors, just one massive pole in the middle of it. The city scaffolds were also high, after all they had to provide a good view for the crowd in the square. The scaffold in Sturefors was very low, the few spectators could watch the execution from above, from the cloister surrounding the courtyard.
Geralt estimated that there were perhaps a dozen spectators in the cloister. A grey-bearded old man in rich clothing caught his eye, he was surrounded by younger and much more handsome men and women of dazzling beauty. Without a doubt, they were the sorcerers and sorceresses from Ban Ard, who had come to witness the execution of their colleague’s murderer. There was also a woman there, a stooped old woman in a black dress and a tight, pearl-trimmed escoffion, her face was completely covered by a thick black veil. A strapping henchman held the woman up having offered her his arm. Geralt had seen this henchman before. He no longer wore a brigandine and a belt with weapons, he was dressed in the simple, grey clothes of a servant or a valet. But Geralt recognised him anyway by his distorted nose.
On the scaffold, leaning against a post, an executioner in a leather mask was waiting. Four lackeys led Holt out into the courtyard. The old witcher walked

calmly, his face was also calm. Just before the scaffold, the lackeys tried to grab him by the arms, he shook off their hands and climbed the scaffold himself. He stopped, turned towards the cloister and raised his head. It looked like he was going to say something. So it seemed.
“I regret it,” Holt said loudly.
The executioner pointed to the seat attached to the post without a word. Holt sat down without hesitation, stretching his hands back to be tied. The executioner fastened an iron hoop with a threaded mandrel around his neck. He placed his hands on the handles of the knob protruding from the back of the post, raised his head, looking questioningly at the prefect. Estevan Trillo da Cunha made a sign with his hand.
The executioner turned the knob. Holt wheezed. The old woman in the escutcheon screeched.
The executioner turned the screw once more. And once more. And that was the end. The old woman screeched again. Only now did Geralt realise that it was not a screech, she was laughing.

****

“So, that’s it,” said Estevan Trillo da Cunha, tapping his fingers on the hourglass on the table. “The drama is over. It’s time for all the actors to leave the stage. Including you, witcher. Regardless of the role you played.”
“I won’t stop you, you can leave Sturefors without hindrance,” he continued. “A nearby road leads south, and that’s where you are heading. Far away. All the way to the Pontar River. The world is big, witcher. Redania stands on the Pontar, and beyond the Pontar are Aedirn and Temeria. To the west, by the ocean, are Novigrad, Cidaris, Verden, numerous kingdoms, innumerous towns, and various picturesque areas. You’ll like it there, I’m sure.”
Geralt was silent.
“You’ll like it there,” the prefect repeated. “And even if you don’t, you won’t be returning to our land anyway. I would like it to be completely clear, with no room for misnderstanding. I never want to see you again, Geralt. I would also never want to hear from you again. Do you understand me?”
Geralt nodded to show that he understood.
“Before we say goodbye once and for all,” the prefect continued, “there is one last thing…”
“Who was that woman,” Geralt interrupted, “the one dressed in black? The one in the veil? The one who was so happy about Holt’s death?”
“It is not within my competence to give you information,” the prefect grimaced. “But let it be so. She is the Dowager Marquise Cervia Herrada Graffiacane. She was happy to avenge the death of Artamon of Asguth, her lover. They were together for over sixty years. Until the sorcerer’s death.”
“Really? Artamon and that old woman? How old can she be?”
“Eighty-two. Are you surprised that a romance can last so long?”
“I am, but that’s not the point. The fellow with the crooked nose who

accompanied her, disguised as a servant. You should be interested, as the prefect of the guard, that the sorcerer ordered him to murder the priestesses from the temple in Elsborg. Him and a woman named…"
"Meritxell," the prefect finished. "I know."
"The priestesses are still in danger…"
"That's none of your business, witcher," the prefect interrupted sharply. "You're leaving and will never come back again, matters related to the security of the kingdom of Kaedwen no longer concern you. But let's get back to the last matter I was talking about. Are you listening to me?"
"I'm all ears."
"The sorcerers from Ban Ard demanded Holt's body. For autopsy, for their research and experiments. I couldn't refuse them. But…"
Geralt raised his eyebrows.
"Tomorrow at dawn the cart with Holt's body," the prefect looked at the ceiling, "will be put outside the prison gate waiting for the people from Ban Ard. For some time, damn, a longer time even, this cart will be completely unattended. It may happen that someone will appropriate this cart, such things happen. The magicians of Ban Ard should be satisfied with such an explanation. Damn, it will have to be enough for them."
Geralt bowed without a word.
"Prefect…"
"Yes."
"Despite everything… I still have the impression that you are more friendly than hostile to me. I'm a little…"
"Surprised?" Estevan Trillo da Cunha smiled slightly. "Well, I was going to hide it, but maybe it will be better if, when you go on a long journey, you understand what benefits come from doing someone a favour in the past. They say that good deeds come back to you. Lady Vrai Natteravn recently treated my daughter. And she said a word or two to me. Farewell, witcher. Good luck on the trail."

Sweet is revenge — especially to women.
Lord Byron, *Don Juan*

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The final resting place of Preston Holt was the edge of the forest above a shallow ravine, under a large, spreading yew with a cracked trunk. It was not too far from the prison, at the gate of which, as the prefect had promised, a cart with a body wrapped in cloth was waiting at dawn. Geralt pulled the cart for several hours, as long as he could before he weakened. Roach could not help him, as a riding horse she would not let herself be harnessed to the vehicle for anything in the world. And so Holt was buried under the yew, the first place that seemed appropriate to Geralt.

Geralt did not mark the grave in any way. He only piled a mound of stones on the grave, which he had partly dug and partly collected nearby.

He sat near the grave until almost sunset, thinking about this and that. He watched the road disappearing in the thicket of the forest.

The road that leads south.

Then he jumped into the saddle and urged Roach on.

He took the road that leads north.

****

Meritxell tightened the girth, adjusted the saddlecloth and the saddlebags, patted the horse on the neck. She turned around when she heard indistinct curses.

“What’s wrong, Beau?”

“Screw it,” Beauregard Frick entered the stable, gritting his teeth. “I’m liking this damn old hag’s service less and less. Not only is she stingy, but also… Damn it, noone will call me a bungler. A little more, and I’ve had enough of this.”

“Well, a little more.” Cibor Ponti rubbed his crooked nose. “Because to tell you the truth, we don’t really have a choice. The marquise is protecting our arses. And if she dismisses us…”

“The bounty hunters will find us in no time,” Meritxell finished. “The bounties are on our heads, have you forgotten?”

“I haven’t.” Beauregard Frick jumped into the saddle. “But I hate to listen with my head down when someone calls me a bungler. But you’re right, enough talking. We know what to do, so we have to do it. Let’s go!”

“Let’s go!”

****

It was around the beginning of September -- and who knows, maybe a little earlier or a little later -- when Geralt reached the outskirts of Ard Carraigh and could look at the capital from a distance, at its impressive towers and steeples with gleaming copper pavilion roofs and spires. He stopped Roach on a suburban hill, near a large garbage pile, and watched for a few moments. Not too long. Mainly because of the flies but he was also in a hurry

to get north. He was even afraid to think that he might arrive too late.
From the crossroads, he followed the road in the direction indicated by the signpost. Towards Ban Fearg.

****

The Crayfish and Snails Inn in Ban Fearg, like all the inns belonging to Ezra Metzgerkop, had a new sign. The new one, in addition to the gilded letters in the name, was decorated with a baron crown with seven batons and four pearls on the outer edge due to the promotion of the owner. The sign was so impressive that for the first few days after it had been hung, the residents of Ban Fearg came in crowds to admire it. The restaurant's sales also inevitably increased greatly. Since the new sign was hung, it was difficult to find a free spot at *The Crayfish and Snails*, the place was regularly chock-full.
Today was no different, so Lozado Cross, the inn's security guard, reluctantly looked at the new guests, three horsemen, a woman and two men, and knew that he would soon be forced to send them away. And the three horsemen, as the guard astutely noticed, were not the kind of people who would meekly endure being expelled. The freckled woman with a flaxen braid had evil green eyes. One of the men had a deformed nose, the other's hair was cut short, down to the skin. All three carried weapons. Lozado Cross felt he should call for help from the rest of the guards, but he was a little ashamed because he was not a weakling and had managed to handle many difficult situations himself so far. So he crossed his arms over his chest and decided to wait for events to unfold.
And events, it seemed, were inevitable. The freckled woman with repulsive eyes led her horse up to the porch, the hooves almost stopped short of the steps, her hand was on the hilt of her sword. The one with the broken nose also rode up, tapping the saddle bow with a formidable metal-headed club.
"Meritxell, Cibor, we're leaving," the one with the close cropped hair spoke from behind. "Let's move. Look at this sign: this golden crown and letters are included in the prices here, we'll spend too much. Let's find another inn. Without a gilded sign, with simple but good grub. Come on, let's go!"
Lozado Cross breathed a sigh of relief.

****

The sign of *The Crayfish and Snails Inn* in Ban Fearg was new, the paint and gilding on it looked quite fresh. The sign was also decorated with a large golden crown with seven batons and four pearls on the outer edge.
The intoxicating smell of boiled crayfish wafted around.
For a moment Geralt wanted to stop and go in, if only to greet his old aquaintance, the restaurateur. However, he refrained. He remembered that the prefect's spies frequented such establishments. He preferred that Estevan Trillo da Cunha didn't find out about his escapade to the north.

He turned his horse and rode away.

****

He reached Rocamora at night. The moon was full, the lights were on in the estate, and the smell of smoke wafted in the air. Geralt had no intention of approaching, much less entering. He only stood on the hill for a few moments, looked. Then he nudged Roach with his heel, urging her to a trot.

****

Jupiter Mello, the royal bailiff, cast an uncomprehending look at the empty room.
“Is there no one here?” he asked in disbelief. “Nobody came?”
“Well, it seems so.” Yon Bervoets, the starost of Ban Fillim, scratched his head. “It turns out that nobody…”
“I don’t understand,” the bailiff frowned. “I don’t understand at all. Just yesterday they tripped over one another… And no wonder, the estate is beautiful, the location is wonderful… And today it’s as if the plague had wiped them all out! Nobody will bid? I don’t understand. Why?”
“Sir, you see…” The starost scratched himself again. “The folks are afeared. Aye, fear gripped ‘em.”
“Fear? Of what?”
“They say…” the starost stammered. “They say that this estate is cursed. Rocamora means “revenge” in Elvish. The owner, the witcher who was executed in Sturefors, had cast a vengeful spell on this place…”
“Superstition! And people believe it?”
“And how can you not believe it?” The starost looked away. “When a lot of fellows saw…”
“What?”
“A spook.”
“What?”
“A spook appeared there at night, on a hill near Rocamora. A lot of fellows saw it. It was bright, the moon was full… He sat on a ghostly horse, his hair was white… It was him, verily. That witcher executed in Sturefors came back as a spook to take revenge…”
“Superstitious peasants!” the bailiff snorted. “Backward people! They imagined a ghost, the bumpkins. Bloody yokels! Village morons!”
To tell the truth, Jupiter Mello’s grandfather used to plow fallow land with a wooden plough and shit behind a barn, but the current royal bailiff preferred not to remember that.
“And what am I supposed to do now?” He spread his arms. “The authorities ordered me to auction off this Rocamora for the treasury… Hey! Who are you?”
“I beg your pardon,” said the newcomer said. “Is this the right place? The

auction of the Rocamora estate, is it here?"
"Yes, it is," the bailiff and the starost confirmed in unison.
"But there aren't many bidders." The newcomer looked around the empty room. "Only me. I mean, it probably won't go much above the starting price, right?"
"That's right," Jupiter Mello confirmed indifferently. "Then we can begin. Your name, for the record?"
"My name is Timur Voronoff."

****

Something was wrong in the lonely farmstead. Even from a distance, one could hear some woman's cries and lamentations and a dog barking. Geralt rode up closer.
Right by the well lay a dead dog. Another dog was running around the farm, barking. By the cottage, on a bench made of a single tree stump, sat, or rather reclined, a large man with his head wrapped in a bloody rag. Next to him stood a woman in an apron, waving her hands and wailing incessantly. A youngster in a linen shirt was glowering at Geralt. There was a whip mark on his swollen face.
"Me husband is maimed, they cut him!" the woman screamed. "Ain't no punishment for such villains! The spawn of the devil, how the earth can bear to have their feet on it beats me!"
"What happened here?" Geralt asked from the height of his saddle. "Did someone attack you?"
"Aye, good sir, they attacked us, they attacked us! Hellish bandits, damn 'em! One wench and two thugs! The freckled wench looked like a turkey egg, and one thug had a crooked nose. They rode into the farmyard as if it were their own, without asking, they started watering the horses. A dog barked at them, so they up and killed it, whipped it to death. The boy rushed to save the dog and they whipped 'im. Then me husband jumped out with an axe, wanted to chase 'em away, but that nasty wench cut 'is head with a sword… See for yourselves… Who knows whether he will live or die… Sir, these dirty villains, they should be punished… Aye, we need a witcher 'ere… A witcher! And they say that they executed a witcher in Sturefors prison. How come, sir? They put the witcher in a prison and execute 'im, and these bandits are allowed to roam freely around the country, maiming people?"
The wounded peasant groaned and moaned. The woman resumed her lamentation. After a moment's thought, Geralt fished out a phial of Golden Oriole from the box and handed it to the woman.
"Take this," he instructed. "Pour it on the wound when changing the dressing. It should help."
"Thank you kindly, good sir!"

****

After a day of fast riding, Geralt rode up a hill and saw from a distance those hellish bandits, dirty villains, for whom, as the woman from the farmstead claimed, there was no punishment and the earth didn't have to bear to have their feet on it. A woman with a blonde braid astride a grey horse. Two thugs wearing brigandines. One of these thugs, Geralt could bet, had a broken and crooked nose.
The three of them headed north, urging their horses on hard.
Geralt stopped Roach, he was in no hurry to ride down the hill. He preferred for the three riders to move away. He didn't want them to realise that he was following them. He wasn't afraid of losing their trail.
He guessed, he even certainly knew where they were heading.

****

Priestess Assumpta of Rivia had been kneeling before the alabaster statue of the goddess Melitele for several hours. None of the younger priestesses even thought about interrupting her in any way. Nenneke, Flavia, Ailidh and Zdravka remained in silence and peace on their kneeling chairs. During the prayers, Assumpta's mother fell into a trance and, as it was believed, she mentally contacted the goddess. Whether this was the case or not, it didn't matter. The priestesses were deeply religious, and for such faith nothing was impossible.
The candles were already dying out in the wax festoons, the dawn was already brightening the stained glass windows, when Mother Assumpta rose from her knees.
"Peril," she said quietly to the younger priestesses. "We are in peril. The gate is to be closed, closed at all times, day and night. And do not let any strangers in."

****

After sunset, just before dusk, he saw Baba Yaga gliding through the forest in a large wooden mortar, sweeping the tracks behind her with a broom. The monster scurried close by, for a moment he saw her large bared teeth.
Baba Yaga was heading towards the village, Geralt had already heard dogs barking and the tinkling of shepherds' bells from that direction. Someone in the village — most likely a child — was in danger. The village needed a defender.
But Geralt was in a hurry to get north. He was even afraid to think that he might arrive too late.

****

Geralt passed the town of Spynham early in the morning. For a moment he

looked at the slender town hall tower and the birds circling around it. Then he was on his way.

****

Those who still believed in her considered the goddess Melitele to be the protector of women, their refuge and hope. For all women, regardless of their age, status and origin, and regardless of profession. It was no wonder then that in the “Lorelei”, the famous Spynham brothel, an image of the patroness was kept: a golden figurine of the goddess in her pregnant, motherly incarnation, with a prominent belly. No one remembered how the figurine had come to be in the bawdy-house, but it was protected and very rarely taken out of its hiding place. There must have been a really important reason for this.

Today was such a day.

Pampinea Monteforte lit a candle and placed it in front of the figurine.

“Goddess,” she spoke quietly. “Make sure that the witcher Preston Holt gets the peace he deserves in the afterlife. Give him an abundance of everything he had little or none of while he was alive in the afterlife. And if he sinned in any way, forgive him and absolve his sins because there are no sinless people in this world.”

Zoë, Fervida and Hippolyta, the girls from the “Lorelei”, stood nearby with their heads bowed. Zoë suddenly approached, placed a second candle in front of the figurine of the goddess.

“This…” she cleared her throat, seeing Pampinea’s questioning gaze. “This is for the other witcher… The young one.”

“But,” Pampinea sighed, “I think he is still alive?”

“I thought,” Zoë whispered, “just in case…”

Everyone bowed their heads. The goddess looked at them with her golden eyes.

****

Geralt reached a crossroads before evening. He recognised the crossroads immediately, a raven helped him. This time, not a whole flock of them, but just one raven. The raven was circling and croaking over the crossroads.

If Geralt were more experienced, or if he listened more carefully and pondered deeply, he might have recognised the raven’s croak as a warning. Go back, the raven croaked. Don’t go north, there lurks a danger. Go back.

But to Geralt, it was just croaking. Geralt didn’t read a warning in it. He urged Roach and headed north.

The raven was croaking.

****

The man lying on the side of the road had his head smashed by a blow from a club or mace, and there was a bloody furrow running across his collarbone and chest, a trace of a sword cut.
Geralt rode up and took a closer look from the height of his saddle.
It looked like the dead man was a trapper. The unharnessed cart that had been pushed off the road was loaded with traps, snares, and other paraphernalia of the trapping craft. Geralt was surprised that there were several bundles of furs on the cart, and expensive ones at that — beavers, foxes and martens. Whoever murdered the trapper obviously did not do it for robbery.
If Geralt had given some thought, he might have guessed why the trapper had died and what of his belongings the murderers needed. And if he had guessed, he would have avoided a great misfortune.
But Geralt hadn't guessed. He urged his horse on.
Towards the north. Towards the town of Frankthal.
And the temple of the goddess Melitele in Elsborg.

****

Beyond the town of Frankthal, in the valley of the same name, the beech and oak groves had already partially taken on autumn colours, contrasting brightly with the dark green of the pines and firs. A stream meandered along the bottom of the valley, and in its wide bend the walled complex of Elsborg, housing the temple of the goddess Melitele, could be seen.
A clump of white-trunked birches, about a league away from the temple, hid the ruins of an old farm, a completely ruined small brick building and the cheerless remains of wooden buildings. The three riders followed by Geralt had chosen this place for a rest, and since it was getting dark, probably also for a night's sleep.
Geralt stopped a short distance away, among the beech forest.
The time had come to make a decision.

****

There are three of them, thought Geralt, looking at the ruins, behind which the flames of a campfire flickered. Three, and one of them Artamon called a sword master. Can I handle them?
He decided to wait until dawn. Even if one of the three was watching and guarding, everyone would be sleepy just before dawn. The best chance, he thought, would be a surprise attack.
He waited for a long time.
A thin streak of brightness appeared over the horizon. The glow of dawn.
Geralt stood up and drew his sword.

****

He moved silently, nevertheless their horses must have smelt him, because one of them snored and stamped its feet. But that was the only reaction. The glow of the dying campfire illuminated a breach, a hole gaping in the ruined wall. He directed his steps there. He entered the breach, carefully avoiding the crumbled bricks. He took one more step. And that step was his undoing.

He stepped on something iron. The jaws of a trap closed and caught him by the calf, their sharp teeth pierced his riding boot. The pain forced him to sit up, drop his sword, and grab the jaws with both hands to try to open them. He couldn't, the iron dug into the skin and held too tightly, the spring wouldn't give way. At the same moment someone jumped out of hiding, grabbed the trap chain and yanked it, dragging Geralt along the ground. Geralt wanted to make a Sign with his fingers, but someone kicked him hard in the elbow to prevent this. Two others rushed out of the darkness, raining blows with ironbound clubs on the witcher. He was hit several times on the head. He was hit on the arms he was covering himself with, he heard a bone crunch. He was hit on the fingers, and they immediately went limp. The pain clouded his eyes.

Someone struck the trap's jaws with a club, driving the steel teeth deeper into his calf, increasing the pain. After another blow the trap teeth reached the bone. Geralt screamed involuntarily. A blow to the collarbone, another blow ito the ribs, to the knee, yet another again to the hands, to the broken fingers. And a blow to the head. And again to the head, very hard. A flash of light appeared in his eyes, and then the world fell apart into a trembling mosaic.

****

"That's enough," said Meritxell. "Enough, or you'll kill him. If you haven't already! Is he breathing yet?"

"Yes, he is," assured Cibor Ponti, tearing the medallion from the witcher's neck. "He's still alive."

"A little blood is needed," assessed Beauregard Frick. "For a better impression."

"The head wounds are bleeding heavily," grimaced Ponti with knowledge of the matter.

"It's good to know." Meritxell knelt on the witcher's chest and slashed him broadly across the forehead, below the hairline, with her knife. Indeed, blood immediately spurted from the wound, gathering in a wave, flooding his face and neck.

"Will that be okay?" Meritxell stood up.

"Perfect," assessed Frick. "Now put him on the mule. Let's tie him up somehow so he doesn't fall."

"And get him to the gate, to the gate. Before it gets completely light."

****

“You didn’t watch over him, you bunglers, cough-cough,” the Marquise of Cervia Herrada Graffiacane coughed, struck the floor with her cane, almost falling over.
“You let, cough-cough,” she continued coughing, “my Artamon die. It is because of you, because of your incompetence and lack of intelligence that all I have left of my Artamon is this urn…”
Meritxell, Cibor Ponti and Beauregard Frick listened obediently. None of them raised their bowed heads to follow the marquise’s gaze and glance at the urn with the ashes of the sorcerer Artamon of Asguth standing on the mantelpiece. The urn was made of majolica painted black, and it was decorated with the sorcerer’s coat of arms: three golden birds on a blue field, *d’azur a trois merlettes d’or*.
“I believe,” the marquise panted and coughed, “you should be chased away… You bunglers, you should be chased away… But now you have a chance to make up for it… To prove yourselves. Listen to my commands!”
The threesome bowed even lower. The marquise fell silent, banging her cane on the floor. “Artamon’s legacy,” she mumbled with toothless lips, “must be paid off. That temple in Elsborg and those priestesses who serve witchers… My Artamon wanted them all to die a bad death. And that’s how they must die, from iron and fire… And this underage witcher along with them… Now listen to my commands…”

****

“Open the gate, saintly ladies,” Meritxell whined, sounding truly tragic.
“We’re carrying a wounded witcher, a young witcher, terribly wounded! He needs help!”
“Let us in as soon as possible!” Beauregard Frick, as it turned out, could also make a career in the theater. “The witcher is barely breathing, he will die without your help!”
A tiny window in the gate opened, someone looked out. Geralt, seated on the trapper’s mule, gathered all his strength, wanted to shout, to warn, but Cibor Ponti, who was holding him, pulled the lasso around his neck, choking him.
“Open up, good ladies,” overacting Meritxell whined. “The witcher is bleeding terribly!”
The gate latch creaked and scraped, the bolt clanged. Geralt, almost losing consciousness, felt with his broken fingers in the pocket of his belt for the amulet, a metal disc the size of a crown. Gathering the last of his strength, he pressed the bulge, a semi-precious stone, heliodor, also known as golden beryl, three times.
The hinges creaked, the gate door began to open slowly. Meritxell and Frick

reached for the hilts of their swords.
Suddenly they heard a loud, insect-like buzzing, quickly turning into a piercing crescendo. A bright oval appeared in front of the temple gate, and a vague silhouette loomed in it. And a moment later, a short woman in men's clothes emerged from the oval.
Vrai Natteravn immediately realised the situation, understood what was going to happen.
From the magician's raised hands a mist or glow erupted, inside which a swarm of tiny sparks swarmed, like fireflies. Vrai shouted a spell, and then the mist enveloped and covered first the horses' muzzles, and then the riders' heads.
All three horses reared up, two of them knocking the riders to the ground. The mule carrying Geralt kicked hard and struck Beauregard Frick's horse in the groin with both hind hooves. Frick stayed in the saddle, but he was already screaming, struggling wildly, trying with both hands to chase away the mist and the fireflies from his face, the fireflies were attacking him fiercely like angry bees. Finally he capitulated, turned his mad horse around and, screaming, galloped off into the darkness. Both riderless horses ran after him, neighing piercingly. Cibor Ponti and Meritxell screamed with terror and pain on the ground, waving their hands incoherently and shaking off the mist and the sparks that were biting their faces and ears. Finally both of them took off on foot, and they ran so fast that they almost caught up with the horses galloping after Frick.
Apart from the kick, the trapper's mule carrying Geralt remained calm. Despite this, Geralt sagged and would have fallen, if Vrai Natteravn hadn't jumped up and caught him just in time, calling for help loudly. The temple gate opened, and the priestesses appeared.
But Geralt didn't see any of this. He sailed away somewhere, somewhere very far away.

A time to be born, and a time to die;
A time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted;
A time to kill, and a time to heal;
Ecclesiastes, 3:2

CHAPTER NINETEEN

He woke up in darkness, motionless. His throat was painfully dry and swollen. He woke up in pain. The pain pierced him like an arrowhead, in tearing, pulsating spasms, radiating from his leg to his spine, to his skull, to his eyes. Sometimes he was conscious. Sometimes he wasn't, but then he dreamt he was. Sometimes it seemed to him that he had died. Then he suddenly rose from the dead and thought that he would die soon. Or if not soon, then tomorrow. Then the pain returned, and he wished it to be that way. He wished the pain stopped, even if it meant death. He wished tomorrow came, tomorrow already.

And then tomorrow would come and everything would start all over again.

****

He didn't remember much from that morning.

Someone was groaning and choking loudly. It took him a while to realise that it was him. There was movement all around, he could feel it, shadows flickered in his eyes, a quivering, wavering light flickered, he could smell the candles and wax, muffled by the sharp smell of medicines and elixirs, and the smell of perfumed soaps.

He felt under his shoulders the painful hardness of the table he was lying on. Then the hardness disappeared suddenly, and he floated away into the depths, sank, drowned. He sank soothingly, because then the pain stopped. For a moment.

There was a rippling light all around. Voices. Voices indistinct, distorted by reverberation, echo as if from under the water, or from above the water, as if he were under the water.

****

"Everyone leave, it's too crowded in here! Only someone who knows about healing should stay!"

"I guess it'll be me."

"Great. All the other ladies, please, leave, you're not needed here."

"Come on, girls, let's pray."

"All right, Mother."

****

"How they maimed him… And these were people, not monsters."

"The reason was that this young witcher, instead of fighting monsters, keeps messing with people. Sometimes he beats them, sometimes they beat him… It doesn't matter anyway."

"Give me your hands, we'll disinfect them. What is this, spirit? Pour some into a glass."

“There’s no bleeding…”
“Unless it’s internal, we’ll check that later. Feel his head. Can you feel any depressions? Fortunately, his head is badly bruised, but I don’t think his skull is cracked. But where are these tremors coming from?”
“Look at his eyes. The pupils are damaged…”
“Ice! We need ice, lots of ice… Stop! There’s no time. Give me that bucket, I’ll turn the water into ice with a spell.”

****

“I can’t feel his pulse! Damn it, I can’t feel his pulse!
“Listen more closely. He’s a witcher. Twenty beats per minute is his normal heart rate, ten to fifteen after elixirs.”

****

“The wound on the forehead is deep, it needs to be stitched. I’ll wash and numb it, you stitch it. Can you do it?
“Of course, I can.”

****

“Let’s attent to his arm. The ulna is intact. The radius is broken, it’s dislocated. I need to set it. Help me… You’re good at this. You’ve got practice. Have you done this before?”
“I’ve done it, m’lady, I’ve done it. More than once.”
“How is he?”
“He fainted from the pain.”
“I didn’t have time to numb it… Well, it’s done. Now the arm needs to be immobilised. Are there any splints and bandages here?”
“Yes, there are. This is an infirmary. We have everything here.”

****

“His fingers and palms are terribly bruised, they are swelling by the minute. But I think they’re not broken… The wrists are fine too… But we need to dress them. A bandage, please.”

****

“What about his leg? What could have caused such a wound? Is it a bite?”
“Yes, but from iron. Iron teeth, from both sides of the calf. I’ve seen injuries like that before. It was a wolf trap. The tibia is intact…”
“But the fibula is fractured. The swelling is increasing quickly…”
“The shaft is broken. It’s almost crushed… I don’t know if we can avoid amputation…”

“Don’t even think about it! Use magic. And that elixir.”
“What is it?”
“Don’t ask, just use it.”
“As you wish, Lady Priestess. Now, I’ll try to knit the bone, bind the vessels, and heal the muscle tissue. For the moment, please don’t distract me. I need to focus, this is a difficult spell…”
“Blood is dripping from your nose…”
“Please wipe it off. I need my hands free.”

****

“Well, we did what we could. Time will tell. But I’m optimistic. It’s a young organism, plus he’s a witcher. And your care is first-rate, I see… We did well, dear Priestess. We did well. Pass me that alcohol.”
“My name is Nenneke.”
“Pleased to meet you. I am Vrai Natteravn, a healer.”
“A first-rate healer, I would add. A true expert.”
“I had an outstanding assistant. I’ll stay here for a few more days, if you let me. We’ll see what happens as the swelling subsides.”
“You are welcome here. You know the witcher well, I presume?”
“I got to know him well, one might say he has earned my gratitude. There’s an opportunity for me to repay him. I would have preferred it not to come to that, but, alas, it has. I feared this would happen. That witcher attracts trouble like a magnet.”
“Nothing to add or subtract.”
“Nenneke?”
“Yes?”
“That brew you used… The tincture… Foxglove, black elder, lily of the valley, and something else. What was it?”
“It’s a witchers’ elixir called Black Gull.”
“Do you produce it? Here, in the temple?”
“Yes, we do. After our joint medical adventure, I like you, Vrai. But I will not give you the recipe.”

****

Sometimes he felt as if he had died. And then the pain brought him back to life.
And then tomorrow would come, and everything would begin anew.

All is not lost -- the unconquerable will,
And study of revenge, immortal hate,
And courage never to submit or yield:
And what is else not to be overcome?
John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

CHAPTER TWENTY

The air was filled with the scent of snow. The witcher inhaled deeply, drawing in the air. The sensation was akin to being stabbed in the lung.

It was still cold, he thought. March, the snow was melting, yet it is still cold. He wrapped himself in a thick cloak, the only men's clothes that the temple had at its disposal. The origin of the cloak was unknown, it had been found tucked away in a corner of the cellar. It was not in the best condition. It looked as though it had served as a tarpaulin for a cartload of coal for several years and then as a dog's bedding for several more. However, it had been washed, it fit him reasonably well and offered decent protection against the cold.

Practically nothing remained of his own clothing. Almost everything, including his beautiful silver-studded jacket and leather boots, had to be cut with scissors back in September of the previous year when he had arrived at the temple in such poor condition. It took some time for the priestesses to procure him proper boots and clothing from the nearby town. A few of priestesses were skilled with needles and they mended those clothes to fit him. They had plenty of time. The witcher managed to drag himself out of bed only by mid-December. After that, there were long weeks of healing and rehabilitation.

From that September and the weeks that followed, there were certain things he wanted to forget, he longed to expunge them from his memory. The pain, the humiliating immobilisation in splints, slings, and bandages, rendering him unable to perform the simplest of tasks. Beginning with the most ordinary, such as being fed with a spoon and drinking through a straw, to the less ordinary, and even more humiliating, when Nenneke or one of the priestesses would grasp him by the penis to guide it properly into a glass vessel with a lip. He did not wish to remember waking up with lips as dry as cardboard, a tongue like a pine splint, and saliva like congealed carpenter's glue. He did not want to remember the agony of turning from his back onto his stomach to avoid bedsores.

Later, he often went outside, not only for the sake of rehabilitation. He did not want to, nor could he bear to look at the bed in which he had spent thirteen weeks, the most wretched weeks of his life.

The melting snow dripped from the branches.

As he approached the stable, Roach greeted him as usual with a loud snort. Geralt patted the mare on the neck and the quivering muscles beneath her skin. He had regained his horse a week after that incident, on the eve of the autumn equinox. The three thugs had abducted the mare along with all of Geralt's belongings, but a week later, Roach had suddenly appeared at the temple gate, without saddle and tack, only with a broken halter made of rope. The witcher, then shackled to the bed of pain, learned of this much later when Roach was already in the temple stable, enjoying the temple's oats. What fate had befallen the mare, what she had gone through, and how

she had managed to return to the gate, remained undetermined.
His joy at regaining Roach significantly alleviated Geralt's grief over the loss of his swords and medallion, as well as the harness and bags, especially his witcher's elixirs. The priestesses promised to recreate the entirety of the witcher's box in the temple workshop, every single one of them. They had been toiling over it for a whole month, but, as they assured him, their efforts bore fruit. Geralt had no reason to doubt.
The loss of his swords and medallion was painful.
He walked along the pathway among the leafless trees towards the soapery. Several adepts were working there at the vats, aromas of chamomile, rosemary, lily of the valley, and other fragrant ingredients which the witcher could not identify, drifted in the air. The adepts were chatting cheerily, laughing. The atmosphere in the temple, one could ascertain, was cheerful. And there was a reason: the eviction order placed upon the temple by local authorities had been indefinitely postponed. According to the official version, the authorities had taken into account the deteriorating health of Mother Assumpta of Rivia. According to the unofficial version, it was the result of intervention by the margrave of the Upper March, relayed to local authorities by the commandant of the Upper March guard service, Elena Fiachra de Mersault. Commandant de Mersault had also chased away the citizens' pickets from the gates of the temple and, as word had it, had sternly forbidden the authorities to organise them in the future. She had visited the temple, inquired about Geralt's recovery, wished mother Assumpta well, and gladly accepted a gift of a box of the temple's branded soaps.
Geralt heard a cough behind him. He turned around. Priestess Nenneke had a habitually stern and very expressive face, more befitting someone significantly older than her barely thirty years. Geralt had a lot of time to get accustomed to it.
"It's cold, isn't it?"
"It's getting warmer."
"Little by little, yes. Let's go inside. I have something to tell you."
"It is slowly warming up," she began, barely having entered. "The snow is almost gone. The roads are passable. I took the opportunity and went to Spynham. Guess where?"
Geralt guessed but remained silent.
"Lady Pampinea Monteforte," the priestess continued, allowing herself a slight smile, "has fond memories of you, I would say she holds you in grateful memory. What have you done to deserve such gratitude, eh? Ho, ho, Geralt, I can understand the young ladies from the "Lorelei", but to earn, ahem… the affection of their lady, a person of considerable experience, well, well."
Geralt did not react, he sensed provocation and trickery in Nenneke's words. He did not believe that Nenneke had learned the truth. Lady Pampinea had insisted on discretion, she had compelled the witcher to promise that he would not breathe a word to anyone regarding their delightful secret

adventure.
Nenneke made a few more expressions of a well-informed yet tactful person, one who knows but will not say. Geralt did not even flutter an eyelash.
“And on top of that,” the priestess wouldn’t relent, “lady Vrai Natteravn, rushing to your aid on wings of magic, saving you with her medical skills. She also owed you something at some point, I assume. A piece of good advice for the future, my boy: stay away from sorceresses. The further, the better. Trust me.”
Geralt did not flinch this time either. Nenneke was clearly disappointed.
“But let’s return to Spynham and the house of “Lorelei”,” she continued. “I visited the establishment for a reason. Such places are a rich source of information. Men tend to become quite talkative in the company of women, many boast in the alcove of knowing secrets to emphasise their importance and status. That’s why, if you wish to learn about matters whispered in the corridors, hurry to the nearest brothel. Do you want to hear what I found out?”
“I do.”
“As you might guess, I inquired about the Marquise Cervia Herrada Graffiacane, the person who you suspect to be behind the attempt on your life and the planned attack on the temple. We must go back sixty years or more, to the late reign of King Dagread. At that time, the marquise (yet to be a marquise, merely Miss Cervia) became entangled in a romance with Artamon of Asguth, a powerful sorcerer from Ban Ard Academy. She was seventeen then, how old he was, no one knew. A few years later, Cervia married old Marquis de Graffiacane, but she did not sever ties with Artamon, continuing to meet with him. Then the marquis died and the widow marquise gave birth to a child. Officially, a posthumous child, the legitimate son and heir of the marquis with the title of count. But it was commonly known that it was a bastard fathered by Artamon.”
“A sorcerer fathered a son?”
“That is not as rare as one might think. It happens, though seldom. It gave rise to the rumours that the marquise’s pregnancy resulted from Artamon’s magical experiments.”
“The widow and the sorcerer adored the young count. And, as often happens in such cases, he grew up a scoundrel and a ne’er-do-well, one who could do as he pleased and avoid all reprimands. The brat was a real trouble-maker, he instigated brawls and got into fights. The authorities turned a blind eye, no one dared risk incurring the wrath of a powerful sorcerer and the marquise who is known at the royal court.”
“I presume that ended badly.”
“Very badly. On one occasion, the count, with two of his friends, instigated a brawl in a tavern in the castle town of Ard Carraigh. There was a guest there, said to be rather elderly, he harshly admonished the youngsters. They pretended to comply and left the establishment. But when the guest left the

place, they ambushed him with the intent to beat him up. Unluckily, they attacked a man who, although aged, knew a thing or two. He gave all three of them a good thrashing. The friends fled with bleeding noses, while the count lunged at the man with a knife and wounded him. The man, as it turned out, had until that moment restrained himself. Only whenthey injured him did he reveal what he was capable of. The count had been fatally and mercilessly pummelled and kicked. Neither doctors nor magic could help. The young count died without regaining consciousness."
"What about the man?"
"Any trace of him has vanished. And they searched for him everywhere, and for a long time, as the marquise raged with fury and used her power right and left, as well as Artamon did. It was then that someone spread the rumour that the man was a witcher. Whether it was true, no one knew, but the marquise and sorcerer began a witch-hunt. They even presented a petition to the king to declare all witchers criminals and outlaws. The king -- by then, it was King Eoin, son of Dagread — naturally refused. Firstly, there was no evidence that the murderer was indeed a witcher. Secondly, collective responsibility could not be enacted. Thirdly, the border marches were plagued by monsters and witchers were needed."
"The marquise and Artamon did not give up, they continued to blame witchers for their son's death, secretly spreading slanderous rumours about them. A few years later, the sorcerer anonymously published his magnum opus *"Monstrum, or the Description of a witcher"*. You know the rest. Moreover, it is almost certain that Artamon and the marquise financed the attack on Kaer Morhen and armed the mob.
"The consequences," sighed the priestess, "are clear for all to see. Preston Holt learnt about Artamon, probably from one of those three men he had killed. Artamon met his end, but the inconsolable marquise plotted revenge. Holt ended at the gallows, but you and our temple were the next targets. The old hag orchestrated it cleverly, for there is no evidence whatsoever. The fact that you saw one of those thugs in her retinue during Holt's execution is not enough."
"It is enough," Geralt said through his teeth, "for me".
"I don't like it," Nenneke frowned. "I don't like what you are saying, boy. Revenge is a pleasure for shallow and primitive minds. Do not forget that."
"It's hard to forget. My body aches all over."
"You are still recovering, you don't feel good yet. I told you, it is not yet time to conclude your treatment."
"Yes, it is time. It is high time. I will leave tomorrow. But I would like to know… Is Mother Assumpta still unwell?
"Unfortunately, she still is." Nenneke's face grew stern once more. "And unfortunately, there is still no sign of improvement. And regarding other matters, nothing has changed. Mother Assumpta still does not wish to see you."

He fell silent for a long time.
“But…” he finally asked. “Has she said why?”
“She hasn’t revealed the reason.” The priestess pierced him with her gaze. “But before her illness, while you lay barely conscious, she prayed several times and was in a trance. In that state, she sees various things. What she saw, I don’t know, and I don’t want to know. I really don’t want to. You, I wager, do not wish to either. Thus let us stick to the facts. Mother Assumpta does not wish to see you. That’s it. She asked me to tell you a few words, and let that be enough for you.I suggest you take them to your heart.”
“What are those words?”
“You are at a crossroads, Geralt.”
At a crossroads, the witcher thought. At the crossroads of ravens.
“I’m leaving tomorrow,” he said dryly.
“As you wish,” she replied just as dryly. “I will not keep you.”

****

The next day, early in the morning, Nenneke accompanied him to the gate.
“I have,” she broke the long silence, “a gift for you.”
“What is it?”
“A headband for your hair. And to conceal that hideous scar on your forehead. Such a scar stands out like no other, anyone will remember it. And you, I believe, would prefer not to remain in anyone’s memory. So, wear the headband.”
“Thank you.”
“Perhaps I shouldn’t ask,” she looked him in the eye, “but I will. Where are the gods leading you now?”
“First…” Geralt was in no hurry to disclose either direction or aim. “First, I need to stop by Belvoir…”
“You don’t know,” Nenneke, as usual, accurately deduced, “that Timur Voronoff has moved away from Belvoir with his whole family. He now resides in Holt’s former estate, which he purchased.”
Geralt was surprised but also glad to hear it. He wouldn’t have to take a detour through the Western March, Rocamora was on his way.
“Thanks for everything. Please give my thanks to Mother Assumpta and all the others. And bid them farewell.”
“May I tell you a few words before you leave?”
“Of course.” He mounted his saddle. “Of course, Nenneke.”
“Revenge,” she said, opening the gate, “is a delight only for shallow and primitive minds.”
“I know.”
“Revenge will place you outside the law.”
“I know.”
“Then go and…”
“Yes?”

“And kill those sons of bitches.”

A merchant was travelling through a dark, dense forest. He wandered for a long time and got bogged down without hope of rescue. Disheartened and desperate, he suddenly saw a malevolent spirit in human form appearing from nowhere. “Do not despair, man!” the spirit said to the merchant. “I will pull you out of the bog and show you the way home, but on the condition that what you possess at home, of which you are unaware, will become my property.”
Lucjan Siemieński, *Polish, Russian, and Lithuanian Legends and Tales*.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

At the entrance gate of Rocamora, Geralt was greeted by the familiar large man clad in a coat sewn of many rabbit skins, formerly a doorkeeper at Belvoir. He took care of the witcher's horse, threw a glance over his shoulder, and was noticeably astonished not to see the hilts of the swords. He handed the reins to a stableboy, a lad of about ten years old.

In the yard, three children were noisily playing, launching miniature tree bark boats in a large puddle, evidently a remnant of a thaw. A striped cat was keeping them company. The cat spotted the witcher first, miaowed and ran away. The children lifted their heads. The youngest began to bawl.

A fair-haired woman burst out of the main house, loudly calling the children. She sprang to them, lifting the youngest under her arm, grabbing the older ones by their hands, and shooing the eldest back to the house, nearly stumbling as she tripped over her skirts. Still shouting, she reached the door and slammed it shut behind her.

A moment later, the door opened, and Timur Voronoff stepped out. He was not wearing his embroidered coat with fancy buttons but a simple grey woolen waistcoat.

"Welcome, witcher. It's a pleasure to see you in good health."

"What's the matter?" Geralt gestured with his head towards the door. "Is this my fault? Have I done something wrong?"

"No, nothing," Voronoff grimaced. "But it's difficult to combat prejudices… Especially when they are deeply rooted. There's a superstition that witchers supposedly abduct children or appear suddenly to collect what belongs to them, demanding a return because a father foolishly made a promise… You will give me what you already have, and of which you are unaware. Something you don't expect, understand? You know these tales, right?"

"I've heard something of that sort."

"Me too," the agent scoffed. "I've heard something. It's funny, but I learnt that the youngest of my trio is on the way when I returned from a long journey, completely unexpectedly. He was that of which I was unaware et cetera. Yet I made no promises to anyone, nor to any witcher. But you try and explain that to a woman. Thus, let us better use the servants' entrance to spare my wife from a strong fright."

During Holt's time, there was always someone from the staff in the servants' chamber. Now, there was no one there. The place was a worse mess than before. Geralt sat on the indicated bench, Voronoff left. He returned shortly with a lengthy parcel tucked under his arm.

"Holt's swords," he announced dryly. "And this is his medallion. He wished that everything went to Kaer Morhen."

Geralt unwrapped the parcel. He grasped the silver sword with its beautifully rounded pommel. He unsheathed the blade. It gleamed even in the half-dark of the servants' chamber. He had seen that sword before. He recognised the etched runes on the blade and their significance.

Dubhenn haern am glândeal,
Morc'h am fhean aiesin.

My shine will pierce the darkness,
my light will disperse the gloom.

Holt's medallion bore an image of a serpent with large venomous fangs.
"Hide and keep it," Geralt returned the medallion to the agent. "For now. I'll take the swords. I need them."
"Holt wished…"
"I know what he wished. I heard it myself. I'll fulfill that wish when the time comes. Did Holt leave anything else?"
"A letter. For you."
The letter was sealed with wax stamped with the head of the serpent from Holt's medallion. Geralt tucked the envelope in his bosom.
Voronoff coughed, pulled out a handkerchief from his pocket, and wiped his mouth.
"I've heard the news," he said, "about what happened to you on the eve of the Equinox. And since you have only now visited me after six months, I deduce that the consequences were severe. Your expression confirms what I suspect: I know why you need Holt's swords. You might be interested that the Dowager Marquise de Graffiacane has dismissed three persons known to you from her service, whom she had previously sheltered within her palazzo, citing as her reason their criminal deeds, of which she, the marquise, claimed ignorance. The dismissed threesome has immediately caught the attention of Prefect da Cunha, and they, evidently forewarned, have fled without a trace. Finding them will not be easy, if at all possible.
"Where there's a will," Geralt grimaced, "there's a way."
"There is. In folk proverbs."
"The woman's name is Meritxell. What about the other two?"
"Cibor Ponti and Beauregard Frick. Ponti is the one with the broken nose. Frick, which may interest you, has proved himself a master swordsman."
"Any other hints?"
"I suspect," Voronoff wiped his mouth with the handkerchief, "that they separated and fled from Kaedwen. However, they will be seeking a source of income, likely each on their own. There are places where people like them seek employment. I would look into such venues. Do you have any means at your disposal?"
"You mean money? Not much."
"I'll give you fifty crowns in cash and one thousand two hundred in traveller's checks. That's how much I owe Holt after covering the costs he requested to be settled. Mainly it was for compensation for Rocamora's old staff. By the way, the estate is no longer called Rocamora. Now it is Sunny Dale."
"Sounds nice. Now that Holt is gone, what is your business, if I may ask?"

“You may always ask. My business is merchant representation. But should someone new appear from Kaer Morhen, I would gladly take on a witcher’s agent position as well. That also concerns you, if you wish.”
“For now, I don’t want it. Farewell, Voronoff. Thank you for everything.”

****

Holt’s letter was written on high-quality paper, pleasant to the touch, the handwriting was clear, like printed text, and the ink did not seep or smear in any place.

Geralt,
if you are reading this letter, then I am no longer among the living. I must therefore confess my guilt to you, or rather, my guilts. I was unable to do this looking you in the eye, it is easier for me with the help of ink.
I, my young witcher, have long known the person who authored Monstrum…, who bears martlets on his coat of arms, and who signed the dedication in the copy of the Sergeant Margulies whom I had slain. I knew it was Artamon of Asguth. And I intended to kill him. But as my progressing illness hindered -- or rather, rendered impossible -- the task, I decided to seek another executor.
Yes, you are right. Our meeting in Neuhold was not a coincidence, and I had a secret reason to extract you from peril. I had a reason and hidden intent in my mind when I made you that offer at the crossroads of ravens. I had a reason to teach you ways to kill with your bare hands. And it was not a coincidence that you found that dedicated pamphlet in your hands.
But in the end, doubts overwhelmed me. A smith’s work is the anvil and the hammer, do you remember? A witcher’s work is to kill monsters. And punishing crimes is the business of the district head and the courts. In spring, let’s be frank, I expelled you from Rocamora. I remember the look in your eyes. And at that moment, I thought of only one thing. That I was saving you. Preserving you. From becoming a killer, just like me. But it turned out that destiny cannot be deceived. You did not kill the sorcerer. And you should not be punished for it.
I regret it.

Farewell,
Preston Holt.

Geralt turned the letter over. There were several sketches on the reverse side, he stared at them for a long time, initially unable to decipher what they depicted. Finally, he understood. The figures outlined in a few strokes represented armed swordsmen. Their stances and poses, feints and thrusts. One figure, he recognised, depicted a swordsman in passo largo, another one depicted porta di ferro. The remaining figures required a closer inspection. He had time for that later.

He urged Roach onto the path. As usual, the mare responded excellently to his commands, all it took was a light pressure of the knee and a gentle touch of the reins on her neck.
The sky grew dark in the north.
But he was heading south.

****

The main gate of Ard Carraigh stood wide open, with no one guarding it.
Geralt rode in, lowering his head beneath the iron portcullis.
From the market he could hear clamour, music, and, mostly, a rhythmic thumping of drums. Suddenly, a merry, singing khorovod burst forth from a side alley. The last in line, a man in a comical three-horned hat, detached himself, went under the wall and began to piss.
Geralt waited for the man to finish.
“What’s going on here?” he finally asked. “Is there some celebration?”
“Don’t you know?” The man in the hat hopped a few times, buttoned his trousers, and turned around. “Don’t you know, chap? You must be from afar, must be from distant lands?”
“From afar, indeed. From far away.”
“And it can’t be otherwise, otherwise you’d know that this is the great celebration and feast for the whole capital, nay, for the kingdom! We have a wedding, chap, a wedding, and what a wedding! The once hostile families are reconciling, the Vaikinens and the Finnegans! Young Redfern, son of Count Gordon Finnegan, is standing today at the altar with the beautiful Ludmilla, daughter of Sirius Vaikinen, the margrave of the Lakeland March!”
“Now that’s news.”
“News, aye, and a big feast! The whole capital is celebrating, the nobility has gathered, dances and booze-ups, with mead and beer galore; Sir Brewer Grohot ordered thirty kegs to be placed in the marketplace!”
“Brewer Grohot?”
“Aye! For you must know, sir from afar, that the brewer’s son, young sir Primian, greatly contributed to the happiness of the newlyweds!”
“Contributed?”
“Indeed, he has! That’s why he’s the groom’s best man! Come with us to the marketplace, you will see…”
“I will, soon, I will. But now, please point me the way…”
“I will gladly do so! Where to?”
“The way to the Palazzo Graffiacane.”

****

The Dowager Marquise Cervia Herrada Graffiacane had dismissed her maids, as she usually preferred to complete the remainder of her nightly rituals herself.

She lit the oil lamp on the pedestal beside her bed. Light was necessary; in the darkness of the alcove, she might struggle to find the chamber pot, which she needed to use several times throughout the night.
She combed through the remnants of her hair standing at the mirror. She took a crystal carafe from the nightstand and took a hearty swig from it. She smiled at her memories. The emerald-hued liquid in the carafe was a sleeping draught, distilled by the sorcerers of Ban Ard from one of the witchers' elixirs, procured on the eve of last year's equinox by her mercenaries. The concoction induced deep sleep, perhaps also because the sorcerers had generously fortified it with strong alcohol.
The marquise lay down on her bed. Only now, which was also part of the ritual, did she remove the diamond necklace from her neck, hanging it on a stand designed for that purpose, alongside numerous other necklaces, pendants, and jewels. Among these, in a place of honour, hung the medallion depicting a wolf's head with bared fangs. The marquise toyed with the medallion, smiling again. She fondly recalled the moment she had received the medallion along with assurances that the witcher who wore it had been beaten to death.
She fell asleep with a smile on her lips.
She did not know what had awakened her. Perhaps a rustle, perhaps a draught. She opened her eyes. And saw the medallion right before her face, the wolf's head and its bared fangs. She saw the fist holding onto the chain of the medallion.
And those eyes with wide snake-like pupils.
The witcher was gazing down at her, he was motionless and silent.
The marquise felt warmth and wetness beneath her, she realised that she had pissed herself from fear. She whimpered, squeezed her eyes shut, and felt a terrible pressure in her throat and chest.
When she opened her eyes again a moment later, the witcher and the medallion were gone. It worked, she thought, fighting against the pressure in her throat. He did nothing to me, he was scared, he fled. I will still get him, she thought, I will make him regret it…
I am still alive, she thought.
And then she died.

People should either be caressed or crushed. If you do them minor damage they will get their revenge; but if you cripple them there is nothing they can do. If you need to injure someone, do it in such a way that you do not have to fear their vengeance.
Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

A light rain was falling, it was fine but it fell long enough to turn the narrow alleys of the river port of Piana into a muddy quagmire. Here and there, planks of timber lay in the mud, to allow movement around the town without the risk of getting stuck. The planks, however, were few, and hopping across them reminded Geralt of Kaer Morhen and witcher trainings on the "Comb". After several leaps, he finally found what he was looking for -- a ramshackle house with a rotting, moss-covered thatched roof along with an attached stable. The door of the house was adorned with a large bundle of straw.

Geralt pushed the door, it was crooked, stiff and poorly set in the frame. He took a breath and stepped inside. In the darkness, he felt around and pushed aside a stiff, dirt-soiled mat.

Inside, in a room dimly lit by flickering lamps and candles, several men were seated at tables. Behind a primitive bar, the innkeeper wiped a mug with an apron.

Geralt coughed and spat on the floor. And waited.

"Name?" croaked the nearest man after some time, measuring Geralt with a suspicious look from beneath his thick grey brows.

"Esau Kelly."

"That'll do. Your turn will come after Lubodrog, the one sitting over there."

"Fine." Geralt sat at a corner table. He had already become well acquainted with the custom.

Usually, the meeting places for those seeking work as bodyguards were taverns, typically squalid and located on the outskirts of towns, in isolated, ugly, and dangerous areas. The agreed signal that it was the right place was a bundle of straw hung on the door.

When you enter such a place, you are greeted with a heavy odor of poor beer, sweat, urine, garlic, cabbage, worn-out rags, old shoes, and hell knows what else. You had to endure this and enter boldly, thus signalling your belonging to the trade.

The bodyguards had their own customs and traditions, some almost ritual in nature. When entering a venue for the first time, it was customary to spit heartily on the sawdust-strewn floor. It was a sign of belonging to the guild. Others trying to enter were discouraged, sometimes very strongly and violently.

Anyone who demonstrated knowledge of the customs was allowed to settle in. He would be told who is the last to be hired and when his turn comes. After that, they could do as they pleased, or sit in a corner and do nothing. Geralt always chose the latter. After glancing around, he would settle in and observe the customs.

Among the more bizarre customs was the boisterous salute following someone sneezing, sounding like: "May you shit yourself at once!". When someone raised a toast to the king, one had to stand up and drink. The question of which king it referred to was considered a faux pas, met with

mostly verbal rebukes. When one was going to make water, everyone present had to declare quickly, “I hire the unemployed one!” Those who did not would have their shoes and pant legs pissed on.
The members of the brotherhood would spend their time in the tavern, drinking heavily, chatting, reminiscing about past successes and failures, earnings and losses, playing dice, dozing against the wall, or with their heads on the table, or sitting still with their eyes fixed on the void.
From time to time, though rarely, someone would burst in and loudly announce how many were needed, for what, and for how much. The luckiest ones, on whom their turn fell, would leave or resign in favour of the next, waiting for a better offer. It often happened that someone left the premises and the queue, bored or resolved to seek his fortune elsewhere.
Occasionally, a newcomer would appear. Geralt showed no sign of interest but watched closely.
He had gleaned his first likely addresses in Kaedwen along with some useful information from his friends, the couriers from the Lower March. Thanks to this information, he located an establishment frequented by those seeking work as bodyguards. This had happened in the early days of April, on the outskirts of the fort and the garrison town of Ban Gleann. However, finding no trace of Meritxell, Ponti, or Frick here or in several other locations in Kaedwen, the witcher crossed the border at the Pontar River and visited the town of Rancourt, which lay already within the kingdom of Aedirn. Rancourt, situated on a trade route leading from Ard Carraigh to Vengerberg, was popular among bodyguards as well as among the wandering merchants who employed them. Skeletons of both men and horses could frequently be seen along the route, urging traders to invest in protection. That’s why traffic in Rancourt was considerable, yet here too, Geralt did not find any leads regarding the trio he sought. To his surprise, however, he had waited long enough and it was his turn to get hired, so he set off as a merchant escort to Hagge, situated along a similarly frequented route leading far, ultimately to Gors Velen located in the kingdom of Temeria.
Hagge was a somber little town laying in the shadow of an even more somber castle. A strong military detachment was stationed at the castle, ready to repel any further possible attempts of Kaedwen’s Lower March margraves to seize the border territory. Thanks to this military presence, a brothel thrived in the town, and there were deserters among the employment-seeking guards. Pigs rooted in the mud between dilapidated buildings, goats bleated, and ducks paddled in puddles.
Once again, Geralt found no trace of the gang. For the first time, doubt crept into his mind. He feared that he was trying to find a needle in a haystack, yet it was unclear whether the haystack, the meadow, or even the entire area was the right place. Nevertheless, he refused to give up. He crossed another border and moved into the kingdom of Redania, where he resumed his search in the settlement of White Bridge, a river port on the waterway

leading to Novigrad. The spot for bodyguards was crowded there, but soon enough, the place was empty. The Redanian militia had raided the establishment, arresting over half of the patrons, those wanted for various crimes, most of whom owed overdue fines. Fortunately for Geralt, neither his assumed name nor his physical description appeared on any wanted list, allowing him to continue his quest.

His next stop was the outskirts of a small town called Travna, also located on the Pontar. And there, fortune finally smiled upon him, he stumbled upon his first lead and some information. The information was, in truth, vague, and unclear, but it was a lead nonetheless. One should not dismiss it. Geralt followed the trail. And found himself in the port of Piana.

And that was precisely where he was now.

The crooked, creaking door groaned open.

"Greetings, brethren!"

The voice was oddly buzzing, as if the speaker had a clogged or crooked nose. Geralt hid himself into the corner and into the darkness.

"There's work to be done!" announced the buzzing newcomer. "I need two men to make me company, escort to Rinde, a quarter crown a day. Are there any volunteers?"

"We told you, Ponti," replied a man with grey eyebrows after a moment, "we already told you: don't be the thing that hangs under a horse. And from what I hear, you are still a bit of that very thing. We know you. So, look for foolish recruits for your company elsewhere."

"So, no volunteers?"

"Not with you."

"Ha, as you wish. There's no need if you don't want to. When you do, there'll be no chance! To hell with you all!"

"And you're the thing that hangs under a horse."

The door creaked again.

Geralt stood up.

****

It began the moment he entered the stable.

Cibor Ponti probably recognised him in the tavern or recognised Roach in the stable, because immediately after Geralt went in, he lunged at him with a pitchfork, roaring furiously. Geralt dodged easily, laughing inwardly. It was rather foolish, even mad, to attack a witcher with something as unwieldy and heavy as a pitchfork. Ponti couldn't understand this, he jumped, roared, and stabbed, while the witcher sidestepped and evaded the blows like a shadow.

Eventually, Geralt grew bored. He lunged, seized the pitchfork handle, twisted it from Ponti's hands, and struck him directly in the crooked nose with it. Ponti growled, fell to his knees, holding his face. Blood seeped through his fingers.

"Where are Meritxell and Frick?"

Cibor Ponti mumbled indistinctly. The pitchfork handle actually repaired his nose, straightening it, yet the thug was still humming, perhaps even more than before. Some cartilage must have shifted inside his nose.
“Where are Meritxell and Frick?”
“Fuck you… You son of a bitch… You misfit…”
Geralt snatched a coil of hemp rope from the wall, threw it around Ponti’s neck from behind, and twisted it, having inserted a stake he had found on the ground under the noose.
“Where are Meritxell and Frick?”
“Fuck you…”
Geralt pulled the rope tight with his left hand and turned the stake with his right.
“Have mercy…” Ponti rasped. “Don’t kill me…”
“Speak.”
“Beau… He protected a retinue… of an important person from Oxenfurt… He’s probably still there… I know nothing about Meritxell… I swear…”
Geralt gave the stake another quarter turn.
“She headed towards the sea…” Ponti rasped, desperately scratching and tugging at the constricting noose.
“She wanted to sail away… somewhere far… Don’t kill me…”
Geralt remembered September, the eve of the Equinox. Dawn. And Ponti, striking him on the hands and head with an ironbound club.
He turned the stake again with a sudden, firm twist, overcoming resistance. Cibor Ponti couldn’t rasp anymore, he only stiffened. The foul stench betrayed that he had lost control of his sphincter.
Geralt turned the stake yet another half turn. Just to be sure.

****

The university town of Oxenfurt was crowded, noisy, stuffy, and foul. Geralt felt he wouldn’t endure the place for a long time. He was tired of squeezing through the throng, choking on the stench. He failed to find the bodyguards’ meeting place marked with a bundle of straw on the door. Perhaps it was for the best, as he was unsure how the brotherhood had reacted to Ponti’s corpse in the stable. A whole week had passed since that incident.
He inquired fruitlessly at taverns and inns. He decided to have breakfast at an inn, where his questions were dismissed with a shrug in the morning. Afterward, he planned to leave Oxenfurt and resume his search for Meritxell and Beauregard Frick elsewhere.
However, events took a different course.
“Witcher?”
Beauregard Frick had changed his appearance. He let his hair grow but left it untrimmed, now his head was adorned with a ragged halo of greyish locks. Without an invitation, he sat across from Geralt, pulling his sword belt tighter around his waist.

“You tracked me here,” he said flatly, getting past formalities, “to settle scores for what happened in Kaedwen. Don’t deny it.”
Geralt had no intention to deny it.
“You’re stubborn, there’s no doubt,” Frick continued. “I don’t blame you, I’d act the same if I were in your place. But there’s a rub. When it comes to brawls, especially those involving weapons, the law in Oxenfurt is strict and merciless, and the guards are everywhere. So, if you attack me publicly and I kill you, I’ll end up in prison. Even if it is self-defence. Therefore, if you’ve already had breakfast, I suggest we find a secluded place, where no one can see us, to settle our affairs somewhere the law cannot reach us. Is that ok?”
“That’s ok. And this sword is mine.”
“That’s not true,” Frick shook his head. “It’s mine. A war trophy.”
“Bandit loot.”
“Call it what you will. Have you finished breakfast?”
“I have.”
“Then let’s go, before the sun rises higher. I dislike settling such matters in the heat.”
Despite the early hour, the main street of Oxenfurt was already bustling, merchants and traders had opened their shops and stalls, taverns and grills were beginning to smell of reused fat. The noise and commotion intensified. Frick led the witcher into quieter, still-empty alleys. Eventually, he turned into a narrow passage behind a large granary, into an enclosed courtyard.
He looked around, testing the firmness of the ground with the tip of his boot.
“Before we begin,” he said, “I have an offer.”
“The thing is,” Frick continued softly, “that Meritxell, whom you seek as eagerly as I do, is not a sword master. She wouldn’t stand a chance against you in combat. I care for her, we were lovers. My offer is: leave her be. Swear that you will abandon her, and I will spare your life. I will let you go.”
Geralt remained silent.
“You’re young, your whole life is ahead of you. You choked Cibor in Piana, let that be enough for you. Let that satisfy your vengeance. Deal?”
“No. No deal.”
Frick attacked without warning, treacherously, twisting away and swiftly drawing his sword, aiming a blow at Geralt’s head from a reverse half-turn. Geralt ducked just enough for the blade to graze him. He already had his sword in hand and struck back swiftly, aiming at the temple. Frick parried, blocking the blow with ricasso, and leapt back.
“You wanted this,” he hissed.
He slashed with his sword. Frick did a quick gran passata with his right foot, curling the blade into a molinetto. Impossible, Geralt thought, this is impossible, it’s a feint that Holt had taught him. Now he’d follow with a mandritto to the left temple and another molinetto… I’ll parry…
He parried the attack.
Now it would be a contratempo passo largo with the left leg, a molinetto, and

a tramazzone. Holt's feint, a deadly, irresistable feint.
Preston's drawings, Geralt thought. On the letter. Those sketches… Depictions of…
Frick struck lightning-fast, stepping into a passo largo, spinning a molinetto, then bending his torso into a treacherous tramazzone. Geralt did not engage. He closed the distance so tightly that their chests collided, and without hesitation, drove the hilt of his sword into Frick's eye. The eyeball yielded with a soft jelly-like reluctance, the thin bones of the orbit shattered, the steel of the hilt deeply penetrated Frick's brain.
Geralt yanked his sword free and leapt back. Beauregard Frick stood motionless for a moment, horribly grimacing. Then he tilted and fell backward, like a log.
He was dead before he hit the ground.

Smell the sea and feel the sky
Let your soul and spirit fly
Van Morrison, *Into the Mystic*

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

He felt it before he saw it.

The whisper of the wind carried a scent, entirely foreign to him, reminiscent of nothing he knew, and conjuring no memories. Only after a moment, as he stood up in the stirrups, catching the wind and that scent, did he realise that the blue in the distance was not entirely the sky, nor was it any strange cloud formation. It was the horizon. It was that which he had never seen before. And it was what he really wanted to see.

The sea.

In his instinctive response, he wanted to urge Roach into a gallop to reach the sea as quickly as possible, to see it closer, to better feel that scent, to touch it. To taste it.

He held back.

There were matters to attend to.

The path led downward from the hill, through a slope covered with tall grass. An old, dark forest with its disturbingly dense, gloomy thickets towered over the slope. A path wound through the young trees below. Beside the path was a solitary homestead nestled against the thicket. A cottage with a roof of fresh pine shingles, two sheds, a barn, and a fence set evenly around it, behind which there was a yard where hens were scratching in the sand. Smoke curled from the chimney. In front of the cottage, at the hitching post, stood a grey horse.

Geralt knew whose horse it was.

He also knew — he had acquired this information for ten gold crowns bearing the likeness of a Novigrad hierarch — whose cottage it was. The local smugglers' leader resided there. Anyone wishing to board one of the smuggling vessels anchored in the nearby bay had to visit the leader first and pay the appropriate, quite a large fee. Having paid, one could sail away to far places. Far enough to erase all traces and lose any pursuers.

Geralt spurred Roach, descending the hill. He heard high-pitched voices, caught sight of several children playing on the slope, on the yellow sand exposed by a wide fissure. The children did not notice him, absorbed in their play.

He rode down onto the path.

The door of the cottage swung open, and Meritxell appeared in the doorway. She spotted the witcher immediately and dashed towards her grey horse. Grasping its mane, she tried to leap onto the saddle in a single bound. The grey horse startled and bolted ahead, dragging Meritxell, clinging to the stirrup, along on the ground. It looked like she would not escape being trampled by the hooves, but just in time, she released the stirrup, landing on her stomach on the sand. The grey horse galloped down the path.

Geralt saw Meritxell pounding the ground with her fists in a fit of rage, heard her anguished and furious screams.

He did not hurry. He knew he had plenty of time. He knew that she would not

escape him.
He heard a croak.
On the tip of a tall tree among the old, dark forest sat a raven. It croaked loudly.
This time, Geralt understood the warning.
He noticed movement at the edge of the forest. The grass swayed, swayed strangely. Something glinted among it. Something crept down the slope. There were bare patches, sand, gravel, and stone among the grass. They revealed it. A flat, reddish, two-fathom long segmented body, each segment equipped with a pair of lively, bright yellow limbs. A large, flat, dark brown head with a pair of long antennae and powerful jaws.
The scolopendromorph slithered down the slope, coiling like a ribbon, occasionally lifting its head and waving its antennae. It crawled straight towards the children playing in the sand.
The raven was croaking.
Meritxell sprang up from the ground, darting towards her horse, which stood calmly at the road, about a quarter of a league away. In one leap, she was back in the saddle, charging in a gallop, urging her horse with furious cries. Soon she vanished around the bend of the path.
Geralt did not look her way anymore.
Something else mattered. It was a matter of choice.
He jumped down, crossed the slope diagonally with a brisk stride, moving to cut off the crawling scolopendromorph from the children.
He reached over his shoulder and drew his blade.

Dubhenn haern am glândeal,
morc'h am fhean aiesin.

My shine will pierce the darkness,
my light will disperse the gloom.

The witcher walked across the slope.
The wind blew from the sea.
Grasshoppers darted from under his feet.

THE END